

TREK
ENCORE
ONE

trek encore

1

STORIES & POETRY

BY

GINNA LACROIX



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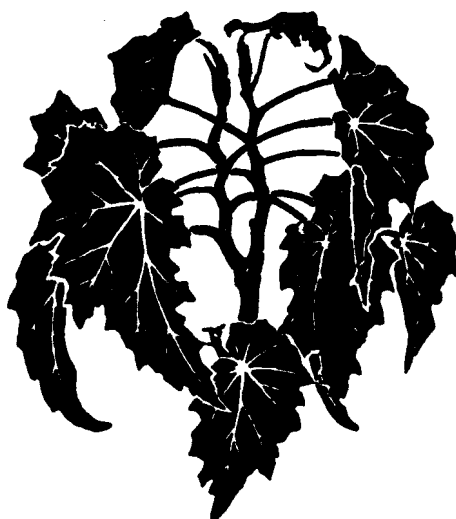
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Editor's Log

1975 was the year I discovered that I was not alone in my appreciation of an old science fiction series called STAR TREK. With the publication of STAR TREK LIVES and the NEW VOYAGES anthologies that year, I was incurably infected and knew I just had to find more of this nifty fan fiction. Easier said than done — my first queries were met with, "Sorry, that zine's out of print." It took more than a year of searching and scrounging before I finally hooked into the publishing network (remember, those were the days before DATAZINE and UNIVERSAL TRANSLATOR — all I had to work with was a very out-of-date STAR TREK WELCOMMITTEE DIRECTORY). I soon began to notice several authors who stood out head and shoulders above the rest — and Ginna LaCroix was one of them; her name on a story assured a most pleasurable read. And thanks to long-time collectors such as Sandra Gent and Ruth Breisinger, who allowed me to borrow their zines by the double armload, I was able to soak up many of Ginna's out-of-print stories. All along I thought it a shame that such a rich oeuvre was not available to all fans — and thus was born the concept of TREK ENCORE (originally simply ENCORE, but a Mel Gibson anthology beat us to that title).

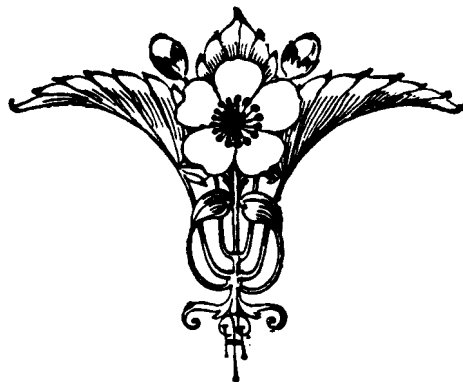
Little did we at IN CASE OF EMERGENCY PRESS realize what a task we had undertaken! Pat Friedman has served yeoman duty at her computer, feeding it each and every page of these three volumes — she had no inkling of the work ahead when she innocently volunteered to "do some typing" for us. And Marie Wallick has been invaluable by giving us access to her mint condition collection of vintage zines — and thanks are owed to all the other San Diego readers who dove into closets and attics searching their collections for us. Usually proofreading is a real chore, but in this case it was a genuine pleasure to read and reread these stories. Thanks also to Kim Knapp and Julie Cabler for their share of time in proofing — which was gauged not by the number of pages, but by the inches of thickness ("I'll have the last 3" back to you tomorrow").

We must also express our gratitude to the editors who have granted permission for reprinting many of the stories and poetry in this collection. Further ahead is a list of those editors who are still actively publishing, including their zines which are still in progress.

If fan reception to the concept of TREK ENCORE is encouraging, we hope to amass other retrospectives of fan writers. We welcome recommendations from our readership of writers they would like to see reprised in this manner.

Happy reading,

Vel Jaeger
EDITOR





FROM THE AUTHOR

A word from the author? Yipes, I've never written a word unless I've been hiding behind Kirk and Spock!

Like everyone who writes, there are a few people who must take most of the credit. First -- Carol Frisbie, for taking the time to patiently explain to a first time writer why, in "Invasion"¹ she couldn't destroy every starship in the Fleet -- and for always pushing for better stories. Second, -- Merle Decker. You all know her artwork, and so much of it has made my stories better than they are. Who can forget her illo in "Reckoning" of a dying Kirk held in Spock's arms. A non-Trek friend said of it that she had never seen such love expressed in a drawing, and I agree. Merle's name should also be on "Truths"³ -- a story we hashed out on a midnight drive back from New York and who gave its first editing comment -- "It's got a beginning and an ending, but you forgot the middle!" Third -- Ruth Breisinger -- for being there. Lastly to all the nutty editors who take on the agony of producing the zines in which our works are printed. Without you, we wouldn't be -- and think of how much money we would have saved!!

Vel suggested a small history of some of the stories. I seem to write differently from most people, having no preconceived idea before starting of what I'm going to write about. The only concrete idea is a "hurt" (mostly for Kirk -- he is so beautiful when he is dirty, bloody, and exhausted -- my Spock tends to sit there stoically and say, "There is no pain ...") or a "quote." That's why I can't get past the short story format. I don't know what's going to happen either. I get so involved as I scribble along that I can't stand it any more and finish so I can find out what happens! I'm afraid I'm never going to write the great American novel. For example, "Safe Haven" was supposed to be a happy shore leave story, but when I discovered men plotting against poor Kirk on page one, I knew I had failed.

"The Human Tear"² arrived out of a humn book found at the National Cathedral. "Breaking Point"² was originally a very long farce, written when Carol Frisbie complained no one was writing hurt/comfort any more. At that time its title was "I Don't Feel Very Good" or "I Assure You, Doctor, I Am Perfectly All Right" or "Why Won't Anyone Ever Listen To Me." In it everybody got hurt. The story also received the best editing comment I've ever had: "It has to be shortened by about twelve pages, but don't take anything out!" "The Christmas Tree"² was written during Hurricane David, which won me the "Landru Award for illogic" at the Volkers' New Year's Eve party.

I often write to relieve my frustrations. After blowing a piston rod through the engine of my car one Christmas, did I get mad? No, I sat down and made Kirk a drug addict in "Images."³ "The Outsider"² turned up when everybody else went off to a convention and I had to stay home and work.

Everyone has their favorite story and their own reasons for it, just as I'm sure most writers secretly dislike much of what they have done. I'm no different. I have a very special place in my heart for "Breach" a story written years ago with probably more emotion than anything else I've done. Even now, it stands the test of time and I still love it. I hope each of you finds something of equal value in the following pages, and enjoy reading it as much as I have writing it....

§ § §

1= TREK ENCORE ONE 2= TREK ENCORE TWO 3= TREK ENCORE THREE



STORIES & POETRY BY GINNA LACROIX

§ = still in print, or periodically reprinted

¶ = yet to be published

£ = unpublished

All others currently out of print

INVASION .. Rigel 3

FABRIC OF SPACE .. Rigel 3

"Musings" -- Rigel 3

BECAUSE OF YOU -- Millenium 1 §

ONLY HUMAN -- Berengaria 9 §

§ ONE GOOD TURN -- Galactic Discourse 2

SAFE HAVEN -- Guardian 2

THE HUMAN TEAR -- Stardate Unknown 5

WE DO OUR BEST -- Fantasia 2

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED -- Log Entries 11

BUT UP TO NOW -- Contact 5

WHEN SOMEONE UNDERSTANDS -- Nexus 1

BREACH -- Turbolift Review 1

THE OUTSIDER -- Contact 8

TRIPTYCH -- Rigel 4

ALL THINGS HEAL IN TIME -- Turbolift Review 2

"One" -- Maine(ly) Trek 1

"Epilogue" -- Maine(ly) Trek 1

A PRIVATE LITTLE HELL -- Rigel 4

RUNNING UP AND DOWN ON GREEN GRASS -- Nexus 3

LIEBESTOD -- Thrust

§ DEJA VU -- Final Frontier 1

§ THE BEGINNING -- Nome 1

§ RECKONING -- Galactic Discourse 3

"Because of You, I Am" -- Vault of Tomorrow 1

"Gem" -- Star Canticle 3

DREAMERS NEVER LIE -- Nexus 5

§ DISCOVERY -- Nome 2

BREAKING POINT -- Sun and Shadow

THE MOURNER -- Sun and Shadow

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER -- Trek Continuum 1

THE ANSWER -- Maine(ly) Trek 2

"No Longer Brothers" -- The Shatner File

£ THE PRICE

§ CONUNDRUM -- Galactic Discourse 4

"The Flight" -- EnterComm 3

RETURNING HOME -- Millenium 4

THE PARTING -- Nome 4

¶ PRELUDE -- Maine(ly) Trek 4

£ NEGATIVE PON FARR

THE PREY -- Gateway 1

IMAGES -- Contact 7

TRUTHS -- EnterComm 5

(Approximately in order written)

THE DREAM -- Alpha Continuum 3

THE SUN IS NO FRIEND OF THE DEAD -- Nome 5

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER -- Vault of Tomorrow 6

REALITY -- Kirk

WE WERE ALL THE SAME AGE ... ONCE -- Kirk

"Legends -- and Men" -- Kirk

§ PRICE OF ACCEPTANCE -- Gateway 2

¶ ON THE WAY TO THE SKY -- Before the Glory

"As I Stand Here" -- Vault of Tomorrow 4

§ A TIME TO CARE -- Galactic Discourse 4

WHEN THERE ARE NO ANSWERS -- Nome 6

THE HOTTEST FIRE -- Vault of Tomorrow 4

§ "Remember" -- Galactic Discourse 4

§ "Perfection" -- TREKISM at Length 3

§ REVERSE IMAGE -- TREKISM at Length 3

§ CATHARSIS -- Matter/Antimatter 3/4

INSANE -- CERTIFIABLE -- Hooker 1

"Only One Like Him" -- Hooker 1

"Alone" -- Hooker 1

£ TENDERFEET

§ COLORS -- Matter/Antimatter 3/4

A COMMON BOND -- Nome 7

¶ A DIFFERENT REALITY -- Kaleidoscope

¶ "The Two" -- Kaleidoscope

¶ "The Reason" -- Kaleidoscope

§ GHINATOWN 1965 -- Hooker 2

§ TWO DIMENSIONAL THINKING 1

¶ THE TURNING POINT -- Contact 9

¶ "The Reasons" -- Contact 9

§ A STRANGER MET -- Vault of Tomorrow 8

§ "View of a Silver Lady" -- Vault of Tomorrow 8

THE WARNING -- Mind Meld 1

§ THE FIRST PAYMENT -- Mind Meld 2

¶ WHAT IS LEFT -- The Needs of the One

(or Galactic Discourse 5)

¶ "A Vulcan Lament" -- "

¶ "The Empty Chair" -- "

¶ "His Name is ..." -- Guardian 7

§ BEYOND TRUST -- Progressions

¶ REVENGE -- Mind Meld 3

Two Late" -- Klee-et/Alpha

Reflections" -- Klee-et/Alpha



Pluggola Page

BEFORE THE GLORY: still in progress; write to Syn Ferguson, 2209-A Monroe, Eugene OR 97405

THE COMPLETE RACK, by J. Emily Vance, reprint; \$10.75 ppd to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

CONTACT COLLECTED: VOLUME 1 - selections from CONTACT 1 & 2, \$11.80 ppd; VOLUME 2 - selections from CONTACT 3 & 4, \$16.05 ppd; CONTACT 9 - in progress, due late 1985; write to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

FINAL FRONTIER 1 & 2, Cynthia Drake; periodically reprinted; write to TIBERIUS PRESS, c/o Sandra Gent, 6472 Cascade St, San Diego CA 92122 AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED

GALACTIC DISCOURSE 1,2,3 periodically reprinted; GALACTIC DISCOURSE 4 still in print: \$14.75 FC, \$13.36 BK SP HD; GALACTIC DISCOURSE 5 & THE NEEDS OF THE ONE in progress; write to SATORI PRESS, Laurie Huff, 709A E. Bullock, Eureka IL 61530

GATEWAY 1 - periodically reprinted; GATEWAY 2 now in print - \$14.00 BK SP HD; write to KALOMI PRESS, c/o Martha Bonds, 5905 Yorkwood Rd, Baltimore MD 21239

GUARDIAN 9 - in progress; write to MAZELTOUGH PRESS, PO Box 248, Wayzata MN 55391

HOME IS THE HUNTER, a novel by B. Volker & Nancy Kippax; reprint, \$10.75 ppd; write to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

INTERSTAT - monthly letterzine, current Trek news; \$7/six issues: payable to INTERSTAT, c/o Teri Meyer, 13924 Jefferson Cir, Omaha NE 68137

KALEIDOSCOPE - features the roles of William Shatner; Vel Jaeger & Beth Carlson, eds; still in progress; file SASEs at WSF, PO Box 1366, Hollywood CA 90078

LEGEND'S END, a novel by Martha Bonds; \$13. BK SP HD; write to KALOMI PRESS, c/o Martha Bonds, 5905 Yorkwood Rd, Baltimore MD 21206

MAINE(LY) TREK 4 - in progress; write to Mary Ann Drach, PO Box 485, Temple ME 04984

MATTER/ANTIMATTER 1 & 2 - periodically reprinted; MATTER/ANTIMATTER 3/4: \$18.60 FC, \$17 UPS, \$15.90 BK; AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED for issues 2 & 3/4. Write to: TIBERIUS PRESS, c/o Sandra Gent, 6472 Cascade St, San Diego CA 92122

MIND MELD 1 may still have reprints available; MIND MELD 2 - \$12.40 FC, \$12.04 BK SP HD, \$11.70 UPS; write to Sandy Zier, 6656 Aspern Dr, Elkridge MD 21227 OR Michelle Holmes, 10941 Trotting Ridge Way, Columbia MD 21044

NOME 1 & 2 - reprints now available; NOME 8 - \$18.00 FC, \$17.50 UPS; write to: Victoria H. Clark OR Barbara L.B. Storey, 445 E. 86th St, New York NY 10028 AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED

ODYSSEY 1 through 8 - reprints & new issues - send for free catalogue to 12528 Cate Ave, Baton Rouge LA 70815

PROGRESSIONS - \$14.50 FC; write to Merle Decker, 7759 Donnybrook Court, #107, Annandale VA 22003 AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED

REUNION, a novel by Beth Carlson - \$10.50 FC, \$8.95 BK; write to IN CASE OF EMERGENCY PRESS, c/o Kim Knapp, 235 Pine Ave #Q, Carlsbad CA 92008

SOURDANI JOURNAL, a novel by Lynda K. Roper - \$8.50 FC; write to PO Box 4392, Arlington VA 22204

TREKISM AT LENGTH, edited by Vel Jaeger - #1 - \$5.00 FC, #2 - \$8.00 FC, #3 - \$16.75 FC, #4 - \$11.80 FC; #5 - in progress, due Fall/Winter '85; payable to TREKISM, c/o Kim Knapp, 235 Pine Ave, #Q, Carlsbad CA 92008

TWO-DIMENSIONAL THINKING - \$10.50 FC, \$9.50 BK INS; write to: Lee Heller, 27 Wilmot St, Watertown MA 02172

VAULT OF TOMORROW 8 - \$12 BK INS; write to: Marion McChesney, 3429 Cheston Ave, Baltimore MD 21211

One:

The Changing of a Definition

One
Alone
Solitary

Leadership causes a unique separation;
I choose for others
life --
or death,
war --
or peace.
The responsibility is mine
made so by the lonely
position of command.
The burden belongs to me alone.

The expression of two together
created me,
different --
not accepted
despite IDIC.
One would not,
one could not
extend love,
leaving me at peace nowhere,
accepted by no one -- alone.

Human	Vulcan
illogical	logical
impulsive	constant
hazel eyes	brown eyes
expressive	revealing

one, solitary -- alone, reached out

one, solitary -- alone, answered

Together
United
One





We Were All the Same Age... Once

The three friends were alone. A half-empty bottle of brandy sat on the table; a mellow mood of companionship filled the room.

"Who would have thought it, years ago," said McCoy finally, "that three such unlikely characters would end up as we have?"

Spock looked up from the glass of brandy that he had been studying. "I believe each of us had reached the goal we set for ourselves, Doctor. I do not understand your statement."

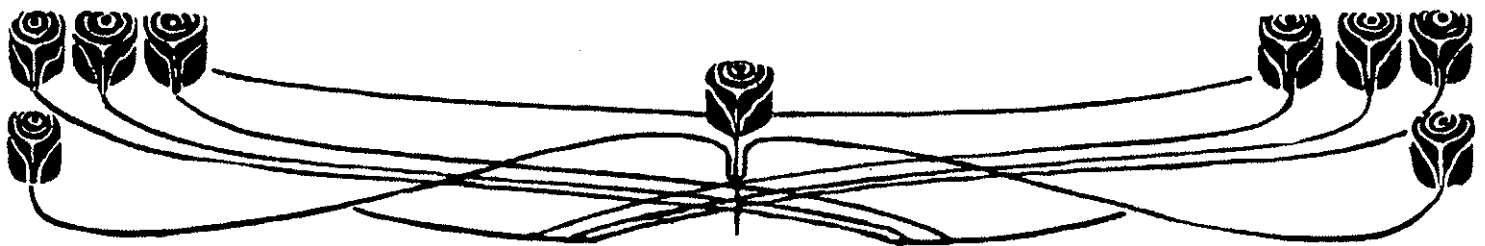
Kirk jumped in before McCoy's glower managed to break the mood. "I think McCoy means ending up here, on the *Enterprise*. I agree, Spock, that we've met our initial goals, but when you first became fascinated by science, did you expect to be in Starfleet?"

"Indeed not, Captain." A faraway look appeared in Spock's eyes. "I had just attained my third year when my human grandfather sent me a molecular model set. My father had started instructing me in basic chemistry, but this was completely mine, to use as I wished without interference. I believe it was then that I decided to make science my life..."

"Now that's a coincidence!" broke in McCoy. "On my third birthday, my Dad gave me one of his old stethoscopes. I spent weeks with it pressed against anything that had a heartbeat. Our dog almost ran away from home." He chuckled. "The funny thing about it is that I still have that stethoscope. When I'm really down for some reason, I take it out and look at it for a while. It reminds me of the joy and wonder I once felt, and why I became a doctor." He looked at Kirk. "Why the grin?" he asked defensively.

"You're not going to believe this," Kirk said quietly, "but I discovered the stars for the first time on my third birthday. I was allowed to stay up late that night. We were all outside, and there was a huge shower of falling stars. I remember standing there on tiptoe, stretching as far as I could, trying to catch them. They looked like there were going to fall right into my arms. I cried when they didn't. Dad held me and explained what had happened. It was then that I knew I would live in the sky with the stars..." He stopped, an embarrassed grin on his face.

For a moment they sat silent, then Spock summed up what they were thinking. "It would appear, gentlemen, that we were all the same age...once."





George Kirk stood at the window looking out over the Iowa countryside. For as far as the eye could see, ripening crops were waving in the gentle August breeze. The corn was standing tall, a startling green amid the golden wheat, its rippling waves flowing as the ocean to a distant shore.

Childish voices rose from below. Looking down he saw his son running across the lawn with his friends. He smiled fondly as he watched his namesake easily outdistance the others, then stop, laughing, and wait for them.

A noise from behind him told him he was no longer the only one in the room. He turned to discover a smiling nurse.

"My wife..."

"She's fine, Mr. Kirk. And so is your new son."

He felt a ridiculous surge of pride as he heard the words, then chided himself. He was getting too old for such feelings. He followed the white-clad figure down the corridor and quietly entered the room.

He would always carry the impression close to his heart. His wife, and his son, their eyes fixed on each other, love radiating around the room. He moved forward and bent down. A pair of blue-hazel eyes met his head on and he had the feeling he was being carefully appraised. Then a tiny hand closed on his finger. There was strength in those little fingers and a quiet determination. The tiny infant seemed to know exactly what he wanted. Then he smiled - and they were witness to the first of many smiles that would melt hearts throughout the galaxy.

He smiled back then, with his finger still imprisoned by the small hand, turned to his wife and kissed her.

"Thank you, my dearest love, thank you for...James Kirk."



It is hard to be different. You are always the odd man out, always the brunt of torment. It is especially difficult for a child.

Amanda could not tear her eyes from the lonely figure standing in the roadway outside the house. Minutes before there had been a large group of children - she had been almost tempted to step out and invite them in, but that was not an accepted custom on Vulcan. Children worked and studied, they did not play.

Spock turned and started walking slowly toward the house, trying hard not to cry. Life was gradually becoming unbearable. No matter how hard he tried to control his emotions he was always slipping - his eight years of life were not yet sufficient to master the rebellious human side of his heritage. His classmates did not understand - they had no trouble adapting to Vulcan philosophy.

It had happened again today. He had lost his temper. S'hat had made an innocent remark about the inferiority of humans - especially the human female. There was no reason for anger, yet he had made a fool of himself in front of the others.

He knew his father would be told and once again he would never be able to explain his actions to Sarek - his father would never experience the terrible conflicts that faced him every minute of every day.

He opened the door and came face to face with his mother. He almost cringed from the sympathy and unshed tears that shone from her eyes. He wanted so badly to fling himself into her arms and cry out all his pain and frustration. But he was raised to be a Vulcan and such a display of emotion would be considered almost obscene.

He squared his thin shoulders and gently shut the door against a world in which he would never belong.



"Come on, Len, I'm already late!"

Leonard McCoy dragged a comb through his unruly hair, then gave it up as a lost cause and galloped down the stairs.

"O.K. Dad, I'm ready."

Graham McCoy looked up to see eager blue eyes and a tangled mop of hair. He shook his head at his thirteen year old son.

"If you want to become a famous surgeon you'll have to change your image, son."

They both laughed. It was a long standing joke between them.

He could not remember when he did not want to be a doctor. His father was one of the last of a dying breed - a general practitioner. For over a century the profession had gone to specialties - Graham McCoy was one of the few remaining medical men who could handle a vast array of problems, from surgery to psychiatry. He often said that brain surgery was the only thing he wasn't about to tackle.

During the summer months when he was not away at school, Leonard McCoy always went with his father as he made his rounds. He loved the south, he loved Georgia with its peaceful, unhurried way of life. It was almost as if the tremendous progress of the past few centuries had somehow passed the vast pine forests and red clay hills.

Each year as he went on the medical rounds, he found himself appreciating each patient, each person as someone special in himself - someone to be respected.

His father watched the sensitive, humanitarian feelings develop in his son with some concern. Leonard was prone to hide his real feelings behind an increasingly cynical exterior. But he knew it was an act put on for his friends so the sensitivity of his emotions would not be exposed.

One evening just before Leonard was leaving for medical school, the two of them were sitting on the lawn, the crickets and lightning bugs filling the dusky summer night with noise and flecks of light. They were discussing the future and what it might hold.

"Len, there is only one thing which makes a good doctor stand out from his fellows. He cares, and because he cares, he is hurt over and over again. You have a large capacity for caring and I am afraid for you. Be ready, for I feel life will treat you harshly. I only wish there was something I could do to help you."

His son's extraordinary blue eyes were fixed unwaveringly on his face. Strong hands with the sensitive fingers of the surgeon, took his.

"Dad, you have shown me what a doctor can do by practicing the art of living. I only hope I can be half the man you are."

Leonard McCoy would have many opportunities to remember that conversation and to wonder how his father could have known so exactly what the future held for his idealist son.



Earth was not large enough for the young boy with the expanding dreams. There were unexplored galaxies, new races to be met, places to go, things to do.

Jim Kirk was popular. He was a natural leader in the rough and tumble games of an Iowa childhood. He was a brilliant student and, even at an early age, applied himself industriously. Although he was far ahead of his friends in school, he was no less popular for it. They accepted him as he accepted them.

Night would find him watching the sky. The stars and their surrounding satellites fascinated him. He knew each constellation and the planets which revolved around the different stars. He and his father would spend hours discussing space travel and exploration.

George Kirk knew he was going to lose his son to Starfleet. In his heart he had wanted Jim to stay with him in Iowa, to take over the farm which had passed from father to son for generations.

Sam wasn't going to stay. He was already buried in his biology studies and was destined for a career in research. He had often thought about talking to his younger son - perhaps if he let his feelings be known, Jim would change his mind, maybe even join him in the field of agricultural chemistry.

But not after today. Jim Kirk had met his destiny and the elder Kirk knew it. Every fibre in the nine year old body had cried out in excitement and wonder.

At the invitation of an old friend, George Kirk had taken his young son to the Starfleet base several hundred miles from their farming home and had watched a fleet of alien ships arriving for an interstellar conference. It was the first time he had ever seen Jim struck speechless. He had watched the Andorians, the Tellarites, the Vulcans, and many other members of the Federation arrive - each in the distinctive craft of their planet. They had been allowed to look at some of the ships close up. The captain of the Andorian vessel had even shown them the

command center of his ship.

The trip home passed in silence. They were just approaching their town when Jim said in a quiet voice. "Dad, I'm going to command a starship someday.

He had looked over at his son, a light, teasing remark on his lips. But there it died. Serious hazel eyes had turned to look at him. Jim Kirk had made a statement of fact - not a wishful statement for the future. His son had elected to follow a long, hard road. From what he knew of Starfleet, starships were few and the men commanding them an elite group. Few men would qualify although many would try. All he could do now was give his support in any way that he could.



Sarek stood with the paper in his hand, his eyes focused on the print but he did not see it. He looked up at the slender figure of his son standing at the large windows looking out over the peaceful gardens surrounding the house.

"You know this is expressly against my wishes."

Spock turned and looked at his father, the calm, brown eyes threatening to betray the inner turmoil. He had tried for seventeen years to please this man, he had tried to deny who and what he was in order to earn his father's pride. He found he couldn't do it without destroying himself. So he made the break.

"I can continue my scientific studies at the Academy, Father. I am not abandoning them."

"I am not questioning your studies. You were expected at the Science Academy. All of our house have gone there to study and teach."

Spock drew a deep breath. "Father, I am not like the others of this house. I cannot exist on Vulcan for I am not Vulcan. I do not belong here. I cannot function as an outsider. I can make no contribution to a race who will not accept me for what I am. In Starfleet I would be one of many who are different. There I could contribute - I would not always have to be proving myself."

Spock's words struck Sarek deeply, but he refused to let the pain evident in them register in his mind.

"Have you forgotten Idic, Spock?"

A bitter note crept into his son's voice. "No, I haven't, but others have." He could not face his father as he continued, but turned to look out the window again. "Vulcan has its hypocrites and its prejudices. A difference is not to be tolerated if that difference is a hybrid, and particularly if it is a Vulcan hybrid." His voice softened so Sarek had to strain to hear him. "You would not understand for you have honor and respect. You have never been different. You are a leader; others will always follow you. I do not have that confidence. I do not want the responsibility of leadership." Turning back to his father, he continued. "Human nature is a fragile thing, Father, and I am half human. I will always be half human, even though I try to deny it to myself. Perhaps in leaving Vulcan I can become Vulcan. At least I have to try."

Father and son stood staring at each other, Spock's eyes pleading for the understanding he knew would never come. Finally the acceptance from Starfleet Academy fluttered from Sarek's hand to land on the floor in front of Spock.

"You have made your choice, Spock. I hand you your life free of any commitment to your family. You need not consider yourself my son any longer."

Spock stood looking at the empty space where his father had stood, a deep ache in his heart. Eventually he bent down and picked up the paper.

"What price freedom?" he thought bitterly to himself. "Now I belong nowhere."



Stendy Riches was up to his ears in paper. His report on Bydan Nervous Disorders had finally been finished, neatly typed, and sorted into their correct order and piles. He had spent the greater part of the past year working on it and, because of the results, his career in research was assured. All he had to do now was to deliver it to Dr. Hunnicut in the morning and he would feel a new man.

Suddenly his world fell apart. His roommate came barging in the door.

"Sten," he cried, "she said yes! She's going to marry me! I'm so happy I could tear this place apart."

And, to Sten's horror, Leonard McCoy proceeded to do just that, starting with his neatly stacked and sorted report. He watched in numbed awe as hundreds of pages floated down from the ceiling, only to be trampled under the

flying feet of his rampaging roommate.

McCoy finally exhausted himself and fell limply onto the bed, an idiotic grin covering his face. He couldn't remember being so happy.

"Well, aren't you going to congratulate me?"

It was only then that he noticed Sten's face, the unbelieving look in his eyes as he looked at the strewn pages of his report. McCoy's eyes followed his to the floor and it slowly dawned on him what he had done.

"Sten! Your report...! I didn't..."

Sten nodded, still unable to speak.

"Oh, my gosh!" McCoy leapt off the bed. "Stay still, I'll pick it up, I swear, every last page."

He fell to his task with a vengeance, then slowly collapsed onto the floor. "Oh, Sten, she's so beautiful. I still can't believe she said yes."

Sten finally got over his frozen daze and stood up. "Len, you are a lovesick dolt, but congratulations anyway. Now, if you don't help me pick up and sort out these papers, you won't live to see your wedding day."

The past few years had gone well for Leonard McCoy. He had been accepted in medical school and had gone through pre-med with all its boring sciences and mathematics with no trouble. Everything about medicine was fascinating for him, even if at times some of the subjects did not seem to relate to medicine at all.

Now, at age twenty-two, he was ready for the next step - the five years that would qualify him as a surgeon, the one thing he had been dreaming of for a lifetime.

Then he had met Ariana. All his father's warnings had gone right out the window.

"Len, medicine and marriage don't mix. Medical students and marriage are an even worse mix. If that special girl does come along, hold off - do it for her sake if not your own. Finish school, start your practice before you get entangled. Medicine will be your wife and mistress. You're too intense, son, you're not going to be able to separate your private life from your work. It may make you an outstanding doctor but you'll be hell to live with."

And McCoy had seen it happen. He had seen it happen many times to his fellow students, even to his instructors. But he was different - he knew he could handle the different pulls on his life. So he shoved his father's warning to the back of his mind and took the plunge.



The night seemed to drag on forever. No matter how much he tried to sleep, he couldn't. He had been up several times to pack another item he had forgotten and to discard something he decided was unnecessary.

When dawn finally arrived, he was sitting impatiently in the kitchen, his finally packed luggage stacked by the door.

His father chuckled as he walked in. "You seem a bit impatient, Jim, I'm sure the ship isn't going to leave without you."

Jim Kirk grinned sheepishly but not even his father's gentle teasing could dampen his enthusiasm for long. He was about to go on his first deep space voyage. Fred Bargner, a good friend from school, had invited him to spend the summer on Tarsus IV. Fred's father was doing some research on certain micro-organisms which were located in the area and was bringing his family to Tarsus while school was closed. George Kirk felt it was an opportunity that his son shouldn't miss and agreed to let him go.



Fred and Jim explored the ship together. It was a Starfleet vessel, designed to move cargo and a small number of passengers. Because of the nature of his father's work, Fred had been in space many times and he took pride in being able to answer many of Jim's questions.

In the two weeks to took to get to Tarsus, Jim made friends with most of the crew members. They were impressed with the boy's general knowledge of the workings of Starfleet and what he didn't know he learned quickly and didn't forget. Although he had less travel experience than Fred, he quickly outdistanced him in acquired knowledge and spent a vast majority of his time with whatever crew member had time to talk with him.

But all good things have to end and they finally arrived at Tarsus. Brandon Bargner was there to meet them and take them to the house he had rented.

The days passed as all summer days pass during youth. One stretched into another, there was never enough time to do everything that one set out to do. Fred and Jim grew hard and tanned under the Tarsus sun. At their age, they did not spend much time listening to the concerned adult talk of drought and fungus.

Finally the seriousness of the situation became obvious. Food was being rationed, they were required to stay home or at least stay in the yard - no more glorious hours to be spent in exploring the alien countryside.

Then came the fatal order from Governor Kodos - and half the population died.

Jim Kirk left Iowa at the beginning of that summer as a fourteen year old boy. He returned a man, his childhood destroyed by a senseless act of desperation.



The military pomp and circumstance rang throughout the Academy. Another class was graduating and only the best had made it this far. Proud parents and families gathered around the successful new officers who were trying hard to look as though it was a matter of fact happening and managing only to look slightly dazed.

There was one exception - one cadet who was not being congratulated, who had no family ring close. Spock was standing a little off to one side, waiting for the tightly packed throng to start to break up so he could unobtrusively make his escape.

He had not expected his family to come. He had not been home in the five years he had been at the Academy and, in that time, he had not heard once from his father. His mother wrote regularly with a regular supply of his favorite 'snacks' along with some small presents. He knew that she would have been here today if it had been at all possible, but she tried to follow Vulcan customs as much as possible and a wife's obedience to her husband's wishes was one of the most important. Sarek would not come - Amanda could not come.

He saw a break in the crowd and made his way out of the auditorium. He returned to his quarters and resumed his packing. He had been assigned to a research project on Gamma Hydra 9 under Professor Martin Stanis. He was pleased with the assignment. Dr. Stanis was an eminent scientist who occasionally lectured at the Academy during Spock's time there. He had hoped to have the opportunity to work with him but had not dared to think it would have been so soon. But something in the Vulcan had attracted Stanis' attention. The quiet intelligence and inquiring mind had made him stand out among his contemporaries and he had requested that Spock be assigned to his service when he graduated.

Spock finished packing his belongings and shut the last case. He glanced around the room, a last look to make sure he had forgotten nothing. He looked at the meager stack of his belongings piled beside the door and smiled grimly to himself. He had little to show for his twenty-two years, few possessions and no real belonging anywhere. Then a sudden thought went through his mind. He sat down and composed a stargram.

"Mother. Graduation is completed. I start on my new assignment with Dr. Stanis tomorrow. At present I do not know exactly what I shall be doing. When I have acquired that information I shall contact you. Spock."

Picking up his bags, he left the Academy. There were no hails or farewells for in his tenure there he had made no friends. He had become among humans, the Vulcan he could not have possibly been anywhere else. He was respected for his abilities and for his work, but nothing personal had passed between him and his classmates. But at least now he was simply an alien in a world of aliens. He had carved out a place for himself and had found that he could work with humans, although their passionate illogic proved rather trying. For the first time in his life, he had started to find some peace with his warring natures.



He was a doctor! The degree in his hand could not be refuted. Five years of hard slogging had brought him to this moment. Every waking hour had been devoted to this one goal and now he had achieved it. At age twenty-seven, his whole life stretched out before him, all the things he had so eagerly been dreaming of doing were now a possibility.

He could hardly wait to go home to show Ariana. She had not been able to come to the graduation since she was only days away from the birth of their first child. She had some difficulty carrying the baby and her doctor had advised that she do very little moving around.

At first she hadn't minded, had been content to putter around the little apartment. But the last few months had been difficult. He had been very busy at the hospital, there always seemed to be extra work that needed to be done, patients who needed his time and attention. Recently he had managed to get home only for a few hours of exhausted sleep before he was up and on his way again.

It was then that the arguments had started. He didn't love her - she was unreasonable. And it almost always ended with Ariana in tears after he had slammed out the door. No matter how hard he tried to explain, she just didn't seem to understand how important his work was.

But she would feel better after the baby arrived. Women seemed to get very depressed as they came to term. Hopefully that was all that was causing the problem. He had forgotten his father's warning words.

The apartment was empty when he arrived home. A momentary panic ran through him as he thought of all the things that could have happened. Then he saw the note.

"Len. I tried to reach you at the school and the hospital but I couldn't. The pains have started and I think I better get to the hospital. Please come over as soon as you can. I'm a bit frightened. Ariana."

It was over by the time he arrived. Ariana was sleeping peacefully in her room, his baby daughter was lying gurgling quietly in an incubator. He knew he was grinning like an idiot as he stood beside the small crib but he couldn't help it. Brilliant blue eyes shone up at him, his wife's red hair falling in spikey ringlets around her face.

"Hello, Joanna," he said softly. "Welcome to the world." A happy gurgle answered his greeting.

He tiptoed into Ariana's room and gently kissed the sleeping figure. He loved her so much he could hardly stand it. Her eyes flickered open and a soft smile touched her face.

"Len..."

"She's beautiful and I..."

The hospital intercom interrupted, its harsh, impersonal tones sounding loudly through the halls. "Dr. McCoy, Dr. Leonard McCoy, you are needed in emergency. Dr. Leonard McCoy, in emergency..."

He was gone, the door softly shutting behind him. Large tears rolled down Ariana's face. She was alone again.



"I think you should try, George."

"But he's only sixteen - a year away from the age requirement."

Admiral Quincy Spencer looked at his old friend, knowing what was running through his mind. He was about to lose his youngest son, the son he loved. He didn't want to face that parting. While he was at home the boy was still a child - once he was gone he would be his own man and things would never be the same.

"George, Jim has more qualifications now than most cadets have just before they are ready to graduate! At least contact the Academy. The worst they can do is to say to wait another year."

George Kirk shook his head. "No, Quincy, the worst they can do is to accept him."

And they did accept him. Jim stared at the paper in his hand, reading it for the fifth time, unable to believe what it said.

"James T. Kirk to present himself to the staff sergeant at 0800 hours on stardate 1124.8 to undergo physical and psychological testing as a preliminary requirement for entrance to Starfleet Academy..."

There was little time to prepare and the following days were filled with activity. Finally everything was ready, the uniform of a Starfleet cadet was lying out on his bed ready to be donned for the trip tomorrow. It was to be his last night as a civilian.

When George Kirk went in to see his son, he was not in his room. He eventually found him down by the old pond, standing alone in the gathering dusk. He stopped, not wanting to let his presence be known in order to study the man in front of him.

For Jim Kirk had become a man. As he stood looking across the water of the small pond, his profile showed something his father had not seen before. Jim knew who he was and where he was going in a way few men ever found. And he was not afraid, not scared by life as so many others were.

George Kirk studied the young face, the strong vein in the forehead, the clear eyes and firm mouth, the finely honed body, and suddenly felt he was looking at a stranger - not the laughing, carefree boy he had known.

A noise attracted Jim's attention and he saw his father standing there. Neither said anything but a look of understanding passed between them. Then Jim walked over and hugged the older man, all unspoken words telling in the gesture. And George Kirk knew then that he would never lose his son, that a part of him would always be there in the quiet Iowa countryside.



Lieutenant Spock sat in the Admiral's office. He was keeping his face carefully neutral, his voice expressionless, and hoping against hope that his request would be granted.

Admiral Cochran thumbed through the papers, trying to decide how best to approach the subject. He had little dealings with Vulcans and none at all with a half-Vulcan. Yet the man sitting in front of him seemed more distant and unreachable than any other he had met from that planet.

He cleared his throat, deciding that the two of them couldn't sit in silence forever.

"I see here, Lieutenant, that you have requested not to be assigned to a starship manned by Vulcans. That's a rather unusual request. Past experience has shown that Vulcans work better as a unit than spread throughout the Fleet."

A long pause ensued during which Spock reached the conclusion that he was expected to answer. He wasn't sure of the answer himself so chose his words carefully.

"Sir, I have worked among humans for the past seven years, first at the Academy, then with Dr. Stanis' research group. They follow a pattern, one I am familiar with." He was aware of Cochran's piercing gaze and could not meet it with his next admission, so he lowered his eyes and concentrated on his hands. "I am also half human, sir. I do not pretend to understand the feelings and emotions of the race, but I feel it qualifies me to work among such a crew."

Cochran was a reasonable and sensitive man. He sensed the strain Spock was under as he finished talking. Well, he didn't really care where the Vulcan went. It was only that they tended to make human crews nervous with their infernal cool logic. But maybe the lieutenant had a point - he was half human. Perhaps this would enable him to work in better harmony with the others.

He reread Stanis' report. There was not enough praise the scientist could heap on his twenty-four year old assistant. His work was excellent. But Cochran frowned when he came to the section describing personality.

"Lt. Spock is a hard and willing worker, always takes on extra duties and gives assistance without being asked. But he is a loner. I have worked closely with him for the past two years and admire his brilliant mind, but I cannot say that I know him as a man. This could possibly hamper his military advancement if he is put into a command position."

"Oh hell," thought Cochran. "He's a lieutenant. He's going to be a second officer in charge of the scientific section of the ship. He's not likely to run into any trouble and the crew is just going to have to put up with him."

He put the report face down on the desk. Looking up, he held those dark brown eyes in his gaze.

"Lieutenant, you'll be assigned to the U.S.S. Enterprise and will receive your orders in the morning. She is due to leave orbit in a couple of days - should be enough time to get ready."

Something undefinable flickered in the Vulcan's eyes but the voice that answered betrayed no feeling.

"Thank you, sir. I shall look forward to the assignment." He stood and was gone.

Cochran sat for a long while looking at the closed door. Something bothered him about that man and he didn't know what it was. He seemed so alone; there was no sense of belonging. Then he shrugged. The Vulcan was just one of many, and his mind turned to other problems.



It was official. The sign on the door said "Leonard McCoy, M.D." and under that it said "Surgeon". He had just finished two years of specialized training and at age twenty-nine was ready to start his career. No more would he be at the beck and call of some grumpy senior members of the teaching staff. He was his own boss now.

He opened the office door and stepped inside. The newness of the furniture and the fresh paint made the room seem as if it had never been occupied before. He savored the atmosphere, feeling a little heady.

"Daddy!"

Joanna came toddling toward him as fast as her little two-year-old legs would carry her. He swept her off her feet and high into the air, her screams of delight echoing around the room. As he hugged her close, he came face to face with Ariana. They stood looking at each other for a long moment, then Ariana gave a small smile.

"Hello."

"Hello yourself."

"I wanted to see your office."

"I'm glad you came."

She smiled again and moved around the room, touching books, looking at the paintings.

"It looks nice."

"So do you."

She flushed but did not answer. He decided to take the plunge.

"Ari, I'm sorry about the past two years..."

"Len, don't. They're past. You're a doctor now, you did what you did in order to become something you have to be. Now you're your own man - and my husband."

He felt a lump grow in his throat. He put Joanna down and caught Ariana in a tight embrace. He had made her

life almost unbearable the past few years and they had certainly had their share of rough times. But that was behind them now and he would make up for every minute of pain he had caused her.

"I've got a sitter for Joanna tonight," she said as if reading his thoughts.

"And I don't have a thing to do except spend the next twelve hours alone with you."

He picked Joanna up and the three of them walked through the door, the newly lettered sign totally ignored.



"I don't know, Royce, he's awfully young."

Admiral Royce Bennett grinned at the doubtful face sitting across from him. "Come on, Stan, you read his dossier. He's almost more qualified than the head of the peace mission!"

"But, damn it, he's only a cadet!"

Bennett's grin spread. "If he's only a cadet, what do you call the others in his graduating class?"

Admiral Poole threw up his hands in mock resignation. There was no arguing with what was on the paper in front of him - it was truly impressive.

Impressive, indeed. James T. Kirk graduated first in his class at age twenty-one. He had been a brilliant student from the day he arrived; his only major problem was being too serious his first couple of years. But he had gradually relaxed and had shown abilities that came along once or twice in each generation of cadets. All his instructors knew they had something special and the best part of it was, although Jim Kirk was aware of his abilities, he did not flaunt them in everybody's face.

For he knew he had limitations and they bothered him. Because of his awareness he tried even harder and this would invariably lead to mistakes, small in most people's view - gigantic in his.

But the shouting was over - his parents had left for home, the celebrations had ended and his career was awaiting him.

His first issued orders were brief. "Meet at the Council General's Office at 1100 hours tomorrow."

If he was in the habit of being awed, he would have been so by the company he was in when they were ushered into the council room promptly at 1100 hours the next day. Representatives of all the forces which had fought at Axanar were gathered, plus the leading ambassadors of the victorious Federation planets. It slowly dawned on Kirk that he was going to be part of the peace mission which was being formed to be sent to Axanar.

And James Kirk proved his worth. Although he was the youngest member of the peace mission, he ended up being one of the most important members. For some reason unknown to him, he hit an instant rapport with Ishmay, conquered ruler of Axanar. Because of the lack of animosity between the two men, negotiations went flawlessly and amicably. What could have been a very complicated and nasty situation didn't materialize.

Kirk returned from the mission with the rank of lieutenant, and a new assignment. He was to take over as an instructor in battle tactics for the next term. His knowledge was too valuable to waste.

He was also awarded the Palm Leaf of the Axanar Mission, the highest honour that could be given. His career had started with bright promise.



The rumors had been going through the ship for weeks. Even Spock found himself caught up in the guessing game. Captain Stansky had been promoted to Commodore and everyone knew that he had requested shore duty.

A change in captaincy of a starship was not a usual occurrence and the speculation on who would be promoted was endless. There were many men qualified as far as duty time and experience went, but they weren't always the ones who were chosen. Commanders of starships were men outside the normal stream, they were a different breed and even in a large military organization these men were few and far between.

Commander Christopher Pike was on leave. His assignment on the U.S.S. *Carolina* was finished. He had received a Fleet Citation for having prevented a Klingon raid from destroying the colony planet of Tiaken. He had been badly wounded during the battle and was home on Earth recovering from the resulting surgery.

The message was a simple one - promotion to Captain, Starship Rank and assignment to the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. He was to report to Starbase 11 for final orders.

He closed the dossiers covering the command crew and looked at Commodore Stanton.

"That's a pretty mixed bunch you have there, Chris, but they're but they're a good crew."

Pike nodded, his forehead furrowed in thought. "Spock is a Vulcan - only twenty-nine," he mused, almost to himself. "I've never worked with a Vulcan before."

"He's a good man," said Stanton, "efficient, loyal..."

"I wasn't questioning his credentials, Dave," said Pike with a laugh, "just speculating out loud."



He beamed aboard the next morning - his officers were waiting in the transporter room to meet him. He greeted them cordially, taking special note of his First Officer. She was a tall, dark-haired woman who he estimated to be in her late twenties. She had an air of no-nonsense efficiency about her which he immediately liked. Joe Boyce he knew already, a good doctor and a man he could depend on.

Then his eyes rested on Spock, and his eyes were met squarely. He did not know why he was so interested in this man. He found himself going back and rereading Spock's file again after his conversation with Stanton. There was something unusual about Spock, about a Vulcan working with a human crew, but he didn't know what, or why he was so interested.

Spock looked at his new captain dispassionately. He had heard of Christopher Pike - he was a good commanding officer, well liked by his men. Rumor had it that Pike was a hard man to know, who kept his feelings to himself. Spock felt a bit of empathy. It would be interesting to serve under this man.



Leonard McCoy rubbed his hands across his weary eyes. A sympathetic scrub nurse brought a cup of steaming black coffee and handed it to him. He smiled his thanks, too tired to say anything.

The operation had taken seven hours, seven hours to patch a body back together that had no right to be still living in the first place. He had received the call just as he was leaving his office. He was already late but he had had to spend more time with his last two patients than he had anticipated.

"McCoy, this is Streaker down at Dyners. We have a girl here who managed to fall out of an automatic air car just as it was landing. She fell underneath it. She's really busted up. You're the best, Len - even that may not be good enough. Can you help?"

Without a second thought, McCoy had gone. He completely forgot that it was his twelfth wedding anniversary, he forgot that Ariana had planned a large party and that he had promised that he would be there. The only thing in his mind was the battered body of a small child who needed his help.

The night was half gone when the nurse brought him the message. He felt the familiar sinking feeling as he read it. It was from Ariana.

He tiredly pulled on some clothes and headed home. The home was in its typical shambles after a large gathering. Absently he picked a lettuce leaf out of the large lamp in the hall. He had been practicing his apology all the way home but there was nobody left to give it to. The party had been over for a long time.

He made his way up the stairs and peeked in at Joanna. She was sound asleep and, even at age seven, showed promise of her mother's beauty. He quietly went in and pulled the covers over her shoulders and gently kissed her. She smiled in her sleep and rolled over.

The door to the bedroom was locked. He gave a half-hearted push but knew it was useless. He called softly to Ariana but knew he would get no answer. He had disappointed her too many times, there had been too many broken engagements, too many parties where she had to go alone because he was stuck at the hospital.

At first she met these times with some understanding, then silence, then loud protests. Everytime it happened he promised it would be the last time, and each time they both knew it would happen again.

He went to the closet and pulled out a blanket. He seemed to be spending more nights in the den than he was in his bedroom. And he couldn't think of any way of avoiding it.



The dense, white cloud was quickly coming toward them. He could hear the warning shouts of Captain Garrovick and the others. But his phaser had no button to press, no opening for the rays to emit through. Something had given him a toy!

He could feel himself freeze - then he panicked. What could he do? He tried to grab the phaser of the man standing next to him but nothing happened. The phaser wouldn't come off his belt. He could still hear Garrovick pleading with him to shoot. Then he was enveloped by the cloud, a sickly, sweet odor filling his nostrils and choking him. He felt himself falling and grabbed desperately for any hand hold...

"Dr. McCoy, he's worse - he keeps slipping into delirium."

Strong hands shook the feverish man lying on the bed. "Come on, Jim, wake up! It's only a bad dream. Come

on, try!"

His body ached all over and he felt like his mouth was stuffed with cotton. Blearily he tried to focus on the man standing over him.

"...Bones?"

"Yeah, it's me. You were having a bad dream. How do you feel?"

"Lousy. I hurt all over." Suddenly his dream came back to him. "Doc, I was on the *Farragut* again. We had just been attacked and all those men were dead..."

"Take it easy, Jim. You're not on the *Farragut* - nothing has happened to anyone."

A hypo hissed against his arm and a dreaminess came over him. Leonard McCoy stood with his hand on Kirk's forehead until the young lieutenant had relaxed.

When Kirk woke again he was alone. Slowly he remembered where he was. The hospital - poliomyelitis - he was sick, he could be dying.*

He had been assigned to this planet after the incident on Tycho IV. He had received a Starfleet Citation of Conspicuous Gallantry because of the recommendation given by his executive officer. He had received it while he fought back the tears. He had been the cause of all those deaths, no matter how much others argued against that fact. He would always hold the guilt for his actions. Then he had been transferred to this colony planet as he waited for orders to another ship.

Here he had met one of those rare men who had become a friend. Leonard McCoy, M.D. He didn't know much about him yet, but he knew that "Doc" felt the same friendship. Duties in Starfleet, the uncertainty of life, the orders that keep a person on the move, all hindered the evolving of many friendships but Kirk knew that this one would last.

The thought of the nearness of McCoy relaxed him and the memories of Tycho IV and the *Farragut* faded from his mind. He settled down to a peaceful, healing sleep.



The sickbay was full. Phillip Boyce, the chief medical officer, was beginning to show the strain. In the other room, two bodies were waiting for an autopsy. He finally got to the last bed.

The young lieutenant was lying quietly, deep in private meditation. There was a bad wound on his leg, a hair-line fracture of the bone.

"Thank the stars he's a Vulcan." Boyce thought to himself, "or he would have bled to death."

Sensing the doctor's presence, Spock opened his eyes.

"How's the leg feel, Spock?" said Boyce.

"The bleeding has been stopped, Doctor. The fracture should heal in 9.2 days if it receives no further aggravation."

The doctor hid his smile behind a cough. He had worked on the same ship as Spock for seven years and the Vulcan never failed to amuse him with his speech. He would never dare let Spock know, for the Vulcan was only following the logic of his planet. Still, Boyce sometimes found it difficult to control himself.

Within minutes, the wound was sealed and the leg held tight by an air splint.

"Keep that splint on for a week while you're walking," Boyce advised. "It will prevent any jarring. You'll limp for a few days but as the bone knits, the pain will disappear. I don't see any reason to keep you in Sickbay but try to take it easy for a few days."

Spock nodded gravely and swung off the bed. Boyce frowned at the green stains covering the sheet where the Vulcan had been lying. He made a move to take Spock's blood pressure, then decided it wasn't worth it - nothing would register anyway.

Spock was making his way slowly to the turbolift on the way to his quarters. He was joined by Chris Pike.

"Are you all right, Spock?"

"Yes, sir. No permanent damage."

The two entered the turbolift. Pike ordered it to Deck 5. "Spock, you saved my life on Rigel VII..."

"Captain, I happened to be there, there was no preconceived idea of what my actions were going to be."

Pike smiled. "Yes, I know it was a logical decision on your part, Mr. Spock. You probably didn't set out to receive a broken leg, either."

A glimmer of amusement flickered on the Vulcan's face as he admitted the logic of Pike's statement.

*See "A Human Touch" by Nancy Kippax and Bev Volker in *Galactic Discourse 1*.

Pike found himself wanting to understand this thin, dark man standing across from him. He knew he had Spock's loyalty, but he didn't know how to proceed from there. Well, maybe someday it would happen.

And a glimmer of understanding did start a few days later, due to a totally unexpected incident. Talos IV was disappearing from sight on the viewscreen, their ordeal there was over. Suddenly exhausted, Pike turned command over to Number One and left for his quarters. Spock had been summoned to the biochemistry lab and left with Pike.

The two rode in silence, Spock rather anxiously watching Pike. His captain had a look he had never seen before in a human. It was a haunted look which held a hint of hopelessness. Pike saw the Vulcan looking at him and smiled a little.

"Spock, do you have any idea what it's like to be caged - to be trapped within your own mind and not able to get out?"

A flash of pain shone out of Spock's eyes, revealing to Pike a depth of feeling he had not known existed in his science officer. Almost immediately the look was gone, an iron control had clamped down. But it was something that Pike would never forget. Spock did understand what most men didn't. He understood the loneliness of those in command.



The courtroom was empty, the last footsteps had faded. He was alone. The uncontested decision had taken only minutes. Leonard and Ariana McCoy were divorced.

The end of one life - the beginning of another. He knew he was running. He had a good job where he was, he was needed, he was good at what he did. But he couldn't stay. He couldn't face the places he had known with Ariana and Joanna. So he had applied for space service with Starfleet Command and, at age thirty-six, was embarking on a whole new career.

The weeks flew past. He was a good doctor and learned the new procedures required in space medicine easily. Psychology fascinated him, as did the studies of the stress caused by travel in deep space.

But throughout it all he remained detached. His cynical manner was more obvious than it had been before - he refused to 'feel' for his patients. He was determined not to be hurt again the way he had been hurt by Ariana.

His commanding officer was worried about McCoy. It was unnatural for a doctor to shut himself off the way McCoy had. In a last, desperate effort, he sent McCoy to a plague-ridden planet. Perhaps there, overloaded with work and exhaustion, there would not be enough reserves left to smother the warm, human emotions that he knew McCoy possessed.

But he hadn't realized how badly McCoy had been hurt and his plan wouldn't have worked except that McCoy came in contact with Lt. James T. Kirk.

Kirk was dying, there was no way to get around it. But something in the young, dynamic personality wouldn't accept death. Nor would he accept McCoy's withdrawn, 'hands-off' attitude. Kirk cared. He cared about McCoy even though his life was in danger. He cared enough for both of them.

And because of that human emotion, McCoy found himself responding. He discovered that he was wrong - he couldn't be a doctor and shut himself off from feelings. And he was convinced that the decision which saved Kirk's life, that extra effort, the support, the physical reality of someone else who cared had pulled his young friend through.

Their ways parted after that - McCoy to complete his training, Kirk, promoted to Lt. commander, reassigned to a starship. But each of them had found something priceless in their short time together - each had found a friend.



Admiral Komack hated starships. As a matter of fact, he decided he hated everything in general. It was high time he had a vacation.

He pulled the next dossier toward him and opened it.

"Kirk, James T. Newly promoted to rank of commander. Age 26..."

Komack did a double-take. That couldn't be right!

"...Commendations: Palm Leaf of Axanar Peace Mission; Prantares Ribbon of Commendation, 2nd Class; Medal of Honor; Starfleet Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry..."

His intercom rang.

"Commander Kirk is here, sir."

"Show him in."

He closed the file and looked up with interest to see what was going to come through the door.

He liked what he saw. James Kirk was a man who knew himself but was not overbearing. He was respectful of his superior officers. All reports showed that clearly. Yet he never stayed very long on any ship. Komack decided to ask him why.

Kirk thought about it for a moment, then answered, his eyes holding Komack's, not afraid to state the truth.

"Most commanding officers are afraid of the ambition of others - it puts their job on the line. An ambitious, competent junior officer is a threat. It's only human to resent them, to want them off their ship. I guess that's why I keep being transferred."

The corners of Komack's mouth twitched as he tried to suppress a smile. The man in front of him had hit the nail on the head. How often had he heard the same thing from the commanding officer about some "whipper-snapper who was growing out of his diapers too fast". It came, not from the truly good commanders, but from the ones who had received their captaincy almost by accident or through bureaucratic manipulation. The ones who should be replaced.

"Do you want to command a ship, Kirk?"

The young man looked down at his hands and answered in a quiet voice. "That is why I joined Starfleet, sir. But I have discovered in the service that you do not seek command - it finds you. You do the best job you know how in the position you have been placed. Too many lives depend on you. You don't have time to want to be something else. If a captaincy comes, it comes."

Komack looked thoughtfully at Kirk. "A captaincy will come to you, my boy," he said to himself. "With your attitude and this list of credentials, there's no way you can miss."

Kirk was staring at him curiously and Komack realized that the silence had stretched out into minutes. He quickly cleared his throat and reached for the envelope which contained Kirk's orders.

"You are to report to the *Baffin Isle*, Commander. They are in need of a first officer. She is a transport ship working in close proximity to the Klingon Empire so you'll probably see a few scuffles. Good luck."

Kirk nodded and got to his feet. "Thank you, sir."

Komack watched him walk out of the room and found himself wishing he was twenty-six with those abilities. What a man could do...



Christopher Pike looked at his first officer in utter astonishment.

"You're doing what?"

The solemn, dark eyes gazed at him with no change of expression. The voice remained absolutely steady - only repeated the words that were still echoing in his ears.

"I request permission to leave the *Enterprise*. I am getting married."

"Number One, let me get this straight. You are getting married?"

And so it came to pass. The most efficient officer he had ever seen or could even hope to have serve under him, left and got married. The entire crew's reaction was much the same - they were stunned out, after the initial shock wore off, they were pleased. For, although everyone knew that discrimination was not supposed to exist, there was still some strong resistance in high Starfleet quarters concerning women commanding starships. Number One had probably gone as far as she could go.

Several weeks went by after her departure. Then, one evening, Pike asked Spock to come to his cabin. In the five years they had served together, this was the first time that Spock had ever been in the captain's quarters. He stood quietly at attention.

"Sit down, Spock."

The Vulcan sat, feeling a bit uncomfortable in the strange situation. He respected Pike as a commanding officer, had occasionally gone down on shore leave with him, but had not developed any kind of rapport.

"Spock, would it be possible to take on another responsibility along with your science duties?"

Spock had an idea where Pike was leading.

"It would depend, sir."

"I'd like you as first officer. Starfleet has approved my request - do you?"

Spock drew in a breath. He had been in Starfleet for twelve years. For that length of time he had avoided the responsibility of command. He had told his father that he did not want that responsibility; but he would have to face himself someday - to accept what was bound to happen. He quickly made up his mind.

"I do not see any conflict with my scientific duties, Captain. I believe both positions would be possible."

"Good," said Pike, feeling relieved. He had seen Spock's hesitation in taking command before and, although he

felt the Vulcan would be a good first officer, he was not sure if Spock would accept the offer. "Let's get on with running the ship."



Leonard McCoy looked around his small quarters in satisfaction. The *Forrester* was the first ship he had been assigned to and he felt a certain amount of satisfaction.

All through his training he had felt a nagging at the back of his mind, a small voice telling him that he was running away. And perhaps he was, he wasn't sure. But now, having his assignment orders, a ship, and his duties as medical officer, he once again felt he could contribute.

The *Forrester* was a supply ship. Her duties were to take supplies to the newer colonies of the Federation, an assignment not without its hazards.

He was smiling as he walked along the corridor to Sickbay. The *Forrester* had just left orbit around Starbase 4. The *Baffin Isle* had also been there, and he had spent a greater portion of the last two days with Jim Kirk. Whenever their time wasn't taken up with supply duties or certain other distractions, they were with each other. Each time they met, McCoy couldn't help but wonder at their friendship. Kirk was a good bit younger than he was, yet they seemed to have the same values and the same interests. And there was no doubt they were compatible on shore leave!

The weeks passed quickly. There were the usual assortment of bumps and bruises that needed treating, but nothing very pressing. McCoy went along on most of the landing parties more out of interest than out of need. Unlike most of the other crew members, he had never made a deep space trip before and the uniqueness of each planet fascinated him.

The only thing that he knew he would never get used to was the transporter. Some demented fiend must have invented that contraption. McCoy's grumblings about it were becoming classic lines that would be heard throughout the ship.

Planet S in quadrant 469 was no different from any other colony planet that they had visited in the past several months. They were forced to retreat since they had only conventional weaponry and there was no hope of holding their own against a heavily armed warship.

There were many wounded on the planet surface. With the ship gone and most of the colony destroyed, McCoy had little equipment to work with, and almost no help. That made him no less determined. With a fervor that had followed him all through his medical career, he pitched in, fighting a seemingly hopeless battle and winning more than his fair share of it.

The *Forrester* returned hours later, a bit battered, but at least able to function. Their distress call had been heard by the *Baffin Isle* and the *U.S.S. Potemkin* and was hurriedly answered. In the ensuing fight, the Klingon ship was destroyed.

The *Baffin Isle* came into orbit with the *Forrester* in order to take aboard any survivors. McCoy beamed up with them to make sure that the procedures he had started were carried out properly. He was met as he came out of Sickbay by the first officer.

"Can't keep out of trouble, can you, Bones? Just had to go and stir up a little work for yourself."

Blue eyes, bloodshot from fatigue, smiled back at his friend. "Well, you-all know how it is, Jim-boy. Can't let the big ships get all the glory. Have to stand up for our own!"

He had stood up more than he had known. The Starfleet Citation read "...for conspicuous bravery..." and he was awarded the Legion of Honor.



Areel Shaw studied him as he came slowly across the crowded room. He was interrupted many times on his journey by various well wishers and old friends.

He had matured in the years since they had first met as students. He had an authority now that hadn't been developed then. He was an assured, confident man, secure in his ability to command, yet aware that those under his command were individuals and were to be treated as such.

He was stopped yet again, this time close enough for her to hear the conversation.

"I don't know, Jim. They're going to be recruiting babes in diapers if you don't cut out what you're doing."

Admiral Royce Bennett grinned at the embarrassed flush that spread over Kirk's face. Bennett had been teasing him about his age ever since Kirk had entered Starfleet. The Admiral had been in charge of his freshman class at

the Academy and the two of them had taken an instant liking to each other. Bennett had watched Kirk's career with great interest and an almost fatherly pride.

Kirk finally made his escape and arrived at the table where Areel was sitting.

"I hope these drinks haven't evaporated," he said with a grin. "Well," he continued, once he had regained his seat, "what shall we drink to?"

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then raised her glass.

"To the future. To your ship even if I don't like the name."

He laughed. "What's so bad about the *Potsdam*? I think it's a pretty good name."

"Jim, at this point, you would think anything was good, as long as it was yours."

He nodded ruefully, then changed the subject. "And here's to the fledgling lawyer who is going to make the galaxy safe from all the misfits, common murderers..."

"Jim, please!" she said, laughing. "I am just a minor clerk in the Judge Advocate's office. It will be some years yet before I get to prosecute a case - if ever."

"Areel, you'll be good - you've won enough arguments with me to prove that. I'd hate to be on the wrong side of the courtroom from you."

"That is one place, James Kirk, my 'babe in diapers', that you will never be..."

Their conversation was interrupted by more well wishers arriving at their table.

For, at age twenty-eight, James T. Kirk had been given command of his first ship.



"That's quite a recommendation, Chris. If I didn't know you better I'd think you were becoming fond of your Vulcan first officer."

Chris Pike was sitting in the office of Commander Stewart Trainor. The *Enterprise* was limping in orbit above them, her damages mute testimony to the battle that had just ended. The Klingons were becoming bolder, their raids on the outlying Federation colonies becoming more frequent. The *Enterprise* had been ordered to stop them and she had. But not without great cost in equipment and lives.

And Pike was alive to sit in that chair only because of Spock. He had been trapped in the rubble outside the engineering section, choking in the foul atmosphere caused by the damaged engines. He had finally ordered the main section to blast free and get out - to leave the rest of the badly damaged ship where it was and get the crew to safety.

But Spock had disobeyed. His non-emotional mind had seen the weakness of the enemy - the growing careless confidence as they too early celebrated the defeat of the *Enterprise* - and bided his time. Then he struck - one deadly, lethal attack - and it was all over.

It had been Spock who had rescued Pike, who had lifted the heavy metal off his legs and carried the half-conscious commanding officer to the sickbay. As soon as they were out, the engineering section was sealed off, for the contaminants coming from the equipment were threatening to smother the entire ship. From the length of time he was trapped there, Pike should have been dead. To rescue him was just as dangerous for the person doing the rescuing. He was told afterward that Spock hadn't hesitated, only left brief orders to seal off Engineering if he didn't come out in five minutes. He had risked his life for the human.

Pike looked at the Commodore. "No, I wouldn't say I'm fond of him, Stu. As a matter of fact, I don't really even know him. We've served together for seven years, he's been my first officer for the last two, and I know damn near nothing about him..." His voice trailed off as though he was seeing the truth of his relationship with Spock for the first time.

The silence dragged on until Trainor began to feel a bit uncomfortable. "Well," he said, breaking the silence, "this recommendation says something about you and him. Promotion to Lt. Commander, Award of Valor..."

Pike smiled a bit sadly. "Yes, but I'm awarding the actions of a man without knowing why they occurred."

Spock's promotion duly came through and he accepted it with no show of emotion. He would have been surprised if he had known about Pike's conversation with Trainor. He did not know of Pike's increasing frustration with his inability to know his first officer. It was something that he would never accomplish.

Spock had become more 'Vulcan' than most Vulcans. Away from the atmosphere and tensions that were present on his home planet, Spock strove to become what he felt was the ideal Vulcan. The human side of his temperament completely disappeared. The smiles, the occasional bursts of excitement that he had previously displayed when Pike had first taken over the *Enterprise* were gone. Emotion was kept clamped under an iron will. Occasionally the look in his eyes would betray him, but even that was becoming more rare.

And it wasn't only Pike who noticed it. Phillip Boyce was becoming increasingly worried about the change. And he talked it over with Pike.

"You can't deny he's an efficient officer, Phil."

"I'm not questioning his efficiency. He could probably tackle most any job on this ship and do it better than the person normally assigned. I'm more worried about his determination to keep his emotions cooped up. He's half human, Chris, and it's necessary to blow off steam somehow - to have an outlet. He doesn't. He's cut himself off. And he's going to run into trouble if he doesn't bend a little."

"What do you suggest?"

"Blast it, I don't know! Who knows what goes on inside a Vulcan's mind? But there's one thing he does need - and that's a friend. He needs someone who honestly accepts him for what he is and is not afraid to let that feeling show."

"Come on, Phil, there's no way of getting close to him. If I walked up to him and said 'let's be friends' he'd back off like I'd just burned him."

"I know," said Boyce, a heaviness sounding in his voice. "But, somehow, there's got to be a way. Somewhere, there's got to be someone or that man's life is going to become hell."



"Leonard, you're going to have to be careful or you're going to become useful to the military establishment and I don't think that's what you set out to do."

McCoy grinned ruefully at the tall man behind the desk. Admiral Carlisle Simmons, Surgeon General, Starfleet Command, smiled back.

They hadn't known each other very long but they were firm friends. Men of true ability are drawn together, for they see and respect the good qualities in each other.

A large report was sitting on the desk in front of Simmons. It was a result of five years of work by McCoy, started independently one day when he had nothing to do. It turned out to be a valuable study on the stress of deep space travel. There had been some work on the subject, but never by a man with McCoy's unusual qualifications of doctor and humanist. He had not done his study by cold, clinical analysis; he had done it as a concerned member of the crew. He understood the situation far better than it could ever be understood by an outsider.

He had just finished a special teaching assignment as a direct result of that report. Illness caused by intergalactic travel was becoming more and more common as man went deeper and deeper into space. The medical field was having a difficult time keeping up with it. McCoy's study had been a major breakthrough which had resounded through the medical community.

So he had been 'loaned out' to do a series of lectures at most of the major medical centers in the Federation. For the past six months, he had traveled and taught and, from the exposure to other medical researchers who were working on the same subject, he had compiled the report which was now lying on Simmons' desk. It was destined to become a standard text at all medical schools.

"So," said Simmons, changing the subject, "I see you have requested ship duty again. Getting tired of the sound of your own voice?"

"Something like that."

There was a tone in McCoy's voice that made Simmons look at him sharply, but the challenging look in the blue eyes kept his question unasked. If McCoy wanted to talk about it, he would. He let the matter drop but couldn't shake the feeling that his friend was deeply troubled about something.

And he was right. Leonard McCoy was running away again. His last lecture was given on Earth, at the famed Mayo Clinic, the Galaxy's oldest and still most respected medical center. When it was over, he had a few days free and found himself at loose ends.

He knew before he started that he shouldn't have gone. He hadn't seen Ariana or Joanna since the divorce; he had heard only infrequently from his daughter and not at all for his wife. But Georgia was only a matter of hours away, so he had gone. He would wish bitterly for the rest of his life that he hadn't.

The years had been kind to his daughter. At fourteen, she was blossoming into the beauty that had been promised earlier. She was distantly cool to her father, but he hadn't expected anything else.

It was the change in Ariana that really upset him for, despite the pain they had caused each other, he still loved her. Now standing in front of him, the ravages of too much alcohol and loose living showing clearly, her spiteful words ringing in his ears, he was shattered. He had really just begun to get over the great pain that the divorce had caused, had begun to be able to live with himself and what he had done, and now this.

He said nothing. He just turned and walked out the door. He wanted to get as far away from her as he could. And he did.

Starfleet Surgeon General's office awarded him their highest decoration for his work and he was reassigned to the *Forrester*. He buried himself in his work, wondering if, at age forty, he would ever find peace again.



Jim Kirk looked at himself in the mirror and couldn't help laughing at the ridiculously pleased expression on the face that stared back. Then he walked over and stood in front of the full length mirror. The gold dress uniform fitted him perfectly and the service medals seemed to blend into the material, looking as if they were made there.

A loud knock came on the door. "Come on, Jim, you're going to hold up the ceremony if you don't get a move on. They can't start it without you."

"Coming, Gary."

It wasn't every day that a man was promoted to Captain, Starship Rank, and Starfleet had turned out in force to honor this one. The plaudits were many, but Kirk found himself paying little attention to the speakers.

He was thinking of the person missing at the ceremony - the first person whom he, as a nine-year-old boy, had confided his dream of commanding a starship.

George Kirk had not lived to see this day. That was the one thing Kirk regretted. He had been very close to his father and it would have meant a great deal if he had been here to see it happen.

But he was given no time to dwell on the subject. The brief ceremony was over and the party was about to begin. Hours later there were only a few people left and the large hall looked as though it had just lost a war. As the last of them were leaving, a figure appeared in the doorway.

"Hey, who's running things around here!"

Kirk spun around. "Sawbones! What in blazes are you doing here?"

McCoy came laughing across the room. "You didn't think I'd miss this little party, did you? I had to hitchhike half way across the galaxy to get here. I'd think you'd show a bit more compassion for a friend."

McCoy gave him a bear hug and gratefully accepted the offered drink. He took long swallow, then sat down and looked at Kirk.

"Well, you did it."

Kirk nodded, his face sober.

McCoy grinned. "A starship captain - now you'll really be impossible to live with. The only thing left now is the Cabinet."

"Bones, spare me," interrupted Kirk. "The last thing I ever want to be is a bureaucrat. Besides, space travel is what this is all about. That's where the action is - and the future..."

"Ah, Jim, you are a diehard romantic. Please, don't ever change."

Kirk laughed. "Just as long as you don't change, Bones. Don't know what I'd do if I didn't have your cynical comments blowing in my ear every now and again."

"Just be glad we're not on the same ship where we'd have to face each other every day. Don't know as the Fleet would be ready for that."

Kirk looked at him, a slow idea dawning in his mind. As he thought about it he couldn't see any reason why it couldn't happen.

McCoy didn't seem to notice any difference as he continued on uninterrupted.

"Have you found out what ship you'll be commanding yet?"

Kirk nodded. "The *Enterprise*. She's due in next week for repair and resupply. I'll be taking her out."

McCoy looked at his friend. Kirk was thirty-two years old and he was taking on responsibilities usually borne by men a good ten years older. Suddenly he was afraid for Kirk, afraid of the terrible loneliness and awful responsibility that had been placed on his shoulders. He had seen command destroy before - especially where there was no one to share the terrible guilt that went with the job. For a captain was literally in charge of who lived and who died, and Jim's sensitivity left him wide open.

He stood up and took Kirk by the arm. "Come on. I've just arrived and the party's over. Let's go find us a drink and some company."

So James T. Kirk spent his first night as a starship commander carousing through the streets of Starbase 11, spending almost the last night of his life where the wearying load of responsibility didn't follow him like a jealous woman.



Spock gathered up the computer tapes and turned to leave the briefing room with the others.

"Spock, I'd like to talk to you for a minute."

Pike's voice was soft; it was meant only for Spock's ears. The Vulcan halted in mid-stride and waited for the others to file out. As the doors swished shut, he turned to his commanding officer. No expression touched his face.

Now that they were alone, Pike didn't really know what to say. "We'll be entering orbit around Starbase 11 in a couple of hours, Spock..."

The Vulcan nodded. He already knew that but was aware of the fact that Pike was trying to say something he found difficult and was attempting to start out on neutral ground.

Pike got up and started moving restlessly around the room. Ever since his talk with Phil Boyce about Spock, he had tried very hard to get closer to his first officer, but the Vulcan had held him at arm's length. And Pike had never been able to tell if it was deliberate or not.

He turned back to the slender figure in blue. Spock was still standing with his hands behind his back and his brown eyes had not left Pike. Even after all these years, Pike felt a bit uncomfortable under that scrutiny.

"I wanted to thank you, Spock..."

One eyebrow started climbing. "Well," thought Pike, "I might as well make them both go."

"... I wanted to thank you for your loyalty to me as a commanding officer, for my life a few times over, and for taking on the responsibility of first officer. I know you didn't want to, but you're the best in the Fleet."

By the time he had finished talking, both of Spock's eyebrows were into his hairline. Handing out compliments was not Pike's way. If anything, he was an aloof, rather cold person who never expressed his feelings to anyone, with the possible exception of Dr. Boyce. Spock was at a loss as to how to answer.

"Captain," he said, slowly measuring his words. "We have shared our experiences. I have learned a great deal from you. Your promotion to Commodore was a logical decision."

Pike smiled slightly. A logical decision - that's probably all it was to the Vulcan. He chided himself for hoping that there was some feeling under that placid exterior. He did not realize that Spock was thinking almost the same thing.

The silence grew longer, then was interrupted by the intercom.

"Captain, you're needed on the bridge."

"I'm coming, Lieutenant," he said almost thankfully.

He moved quickly out the door, Spock following at a slower pace. Pike almost ran into Boyce as he got into the turbo-lift.

"Well, how'd it go? Did you talk to him?"

"Phil, I couldn't reach him. He's more distant now than the day I came aboard. He probably doesn't know how long I've been here - or care." The turbo doors opened and the two men disappeared inside.

Spock had been close enough to hear the last of their conversation. He stood looking at, but not seeing, the tapes in his hand. To the passers-by in the corridor he seemed to be reading the tape labels, but he wasn't. His mind was on the man who was about to stop being his commanding officer.

"...doesn't even know how long I've been here - or care."

"Eleven years, four months, five days," Spock thought to himself, "and I do care, Christopher Pike, I do care."



He was going to die. He knew he was going to die and he didn't care. He just hoped it would happen very soon. The whole world was rocking and the violent ache in his head was complaining with every move.

"Come on, Bones. Wake up! For Pete's sake, you didn't drink that much last night."

He felt strong arms haul him out of bed. He protested feebly but as his eyes were stuck shut there was very little he could do. He was half carried across the room and suddenly an icy blast of water hit him full force.

Instantly he was wide awake, sober, and boiling mad. He shot out of the shower to meet a laughing Jim Kirk who had the nerve to be standing, fully awake, shaved and looking like he had just had twelve hours of solid sleep. McCoy hated him at that moment like he'd never hated in his life. Oh, to be thirty-two instead of forty-five!

"You awake?" asked Kirk innocently.

McCoy growled as he grabbed a towel.

"That's good. Hurry up and get dressed. We've got an appointment at Headquarters in a half hour."

McCoy looked at him blankly. "What do you mean we've got an appointment. I'm not even supposed to be here!"

"Don't worry about that. Just get dressed and come with me."

A half hour later, they were standing in Admiral Komack's office. McCoy was still feeling a bit worse for wear, but four cups of black coffee were starting to do their work and at least he could see. He wasn't altogether sure he could hear.

"...Chief Medical Officer aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. Congratulations."

McCoy felt his hand being shaken and then he and Kirk left the room. When they got outside the building, McCoy grabbed Kirk's arm.

"Do you mind telling me what's going on around here? I didn't understand one word that man said back there!"

Kirk grinned. "You did look a bit out of it. It's simple, Bones. Phillip Boyce, who's now CMO on the *Enterprise*, is retiring and the position is vacant. I saw that on the reports I read the other day. Then when you arrived, you said it would be great if we could serve together. I couldn't see any reason why not, and the more I thought about it the better it sounded. So, I was sitting on Komack's doorstep when he arrived this morning."

He fixed his eyes on McCoy. "It seems, Doctor, that you haven't been telling me all. You're up for promotion - Lt. Commander, no less. That takes a bit of doing. So, you've been promoted - I don't think that registered when Komack told you - and you've been assigned to the *Enterprise*."

A silly grin spread across McCoy's face as Kirk's words sank in. This is what they had discussed so often and what neither of them ever expected to happen. But it had. Suddenly the future seemed easier to face.



Jim Kirk awoke with a start, momentarily disoriented. Something was happening today - what was it? Then a smile crossed his face. Of course, today was THE day! Today was the day he took command of the *Enterprise*. He rolled over and looked at the chronometer. It was still far too early to even think of getting up. He rolled onto his back and pillowed his head on his arms. The anticipation was beginning to build. His thoughts ran over all the details of the ship and her crew - he had practically memorized all there was to know about both in the last few days.



The intercom in McCoy's room buzzed. Groggily he answered the call, then buried his head in the pillow. Whoever created mornings had a hatred of the human race, he thought to himself, and a special hatred for him! He dragged himself out of bed and stumbled over to the bathroom. He propped himself up against the side of the shower and let the hot water stream over him. During the process his eyes gradually unglued.

After brushing his teeth and shaving, he felt a bit more human. Actually, he found himself looking forward to the rest of the day. He was due to report on the *Enterprise* at 1100 hours. He hadn't looked forward to a new assignment with this much anticipation since he joined Starfleet.



The light flickered eerily around the red veiled walls, the flame catching and accenting the alien features of the man sitting in front of it.

It was not often now that Spock spent the entire night in meditation, but this had been one of the occasions. He had to do so quite frequently when he first joined Starfleet, when he had first exposed himself relaxing, not needing to calm his inner turmoil so frequently. But he still found change difficult. Last night he had said goodbye to Captain Pike, and goodbye to the structured life he knew under a familiar commanding officer. Today things would be different, and the unknown was always unsettling.



A knock came on the door. Kirk was just pulling on his boots. He activated the lock without asking who it was and, glancing up, he saw that his guess was right.

Leonard McCoy was leaning in the doorway and his eyes took in his friend sitting on the end of the bed. Except for the captain's stripes on his gold shirt, he looked like a cadet fresh from the Academy. As a matter of fact, he looked like a kid wearing his older brother's uniform!

But McCoy didn't say anything. It would only annoy Kirk who was getting rather fed up with comments about his looks and his age.

"Had breakfast yet, Captain?"

Kirk grinned a bit self-consciously. McCoy had never called him that before, and he was both pleased and embarrassed by it.

"No, Doctor, I haven't, and I'm starved. Think you could stand being seen in public with me?"

"Well," said McCoy, "except for that ridiculous grin, you look about the same as you ever did. I think I can put up with it for an hour or so."



Spock stepped out of the turbo-lift onto the bridge. The duty crew was arriving and taking over their various stations. There was a low-hum chatter as instruments were checked, log reports brought up to date, and bits of information were exchanged. He moved over to the computer station to have a word with the technician who was doing the last of the overhaul, then went to the command chair.

He did not sit in it as he normally would, for the chair no longer belonged to anyone. Pike was not on the ship; the new captain had yet to arrive. Although technically the ship was his until the time of Kirk's arrival, he was suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of being in the command chair. For almost the first time in his life he found himself at a loss for something to do. Then, seeing the technician finishing with the computers, he moved over to his normal station and started on some trivial work.



McCoy finished his second cup of coffee and pushed his chair back.

"Well, Jim, guess I'd better be pushing along. Have to be aboard in order to greet the new commanding officer. Besides, I've also got to screw up enough courage to get through the transporter."

"Poor old Bones," said Kirk, laughing, "if Starfleet only realized the sacrifice you make every time you go anywhere they'd be issuing a whole stream of citations..."

"They'd probably just lock me up for being weird," interrupted McCoy with a rueful grin. "So far, I seem to be the only one with my complaint that I've met!"

His eyes met those of his friend as he stood up. Words seemed inadequate for everything he felt he should say. So he simply reached out and put his hand on Kirk's shoulder.



Spock straightened up from his computer and glanced at the chronometer. He knew without looking what time it was but the reflex was instinctive. He turned command over to Lee Kelso and left for the transporter room.



McCoy paused on the transporter platform, waiting for his stomach to settle. When he looked up, he found he was being held in the gaze of penetrating brown eyes. He looked down self-consciously, suddenly having the feeling that he had forgotten to put on something important.

"Lt. Commander McCoy?"

McCoy looked up again to see the Vulcan had moved forward. He stepped off the platform, deciding that he had reappeared in one piece and it would look a bit odd if he stayed motionless on the transporter pad.

"Reporting for duty, sir," he answered as he hit floor level.

Spock's eyebrows rose slightly at the unsuppressed cynical tone in McCoy's voice. It was very obvious that there was little military bearing in the man standing in front of him. This human would bear watching - he was going to be different from Dr. Boyce.

"This is Dr. M'Benga, sir. He will show you to your quarters and answer any questions you may have concerning the medical facilities aboard the *Enterprise*."

McCoy shook hands with the tall, dark man, instantly liking what he saw. M'Benga wore the air of self-assurance that marked all good medical men. His new assignment was starting to look very good.



Kirk watched the retreating back of his friend then returned to his coffee and his musing. He had never known a few short hours to drag by so slowly. He pulled out a dossier from where he had shoved it under the table before their meal arrived. The stamp on the front stood out in bold letters, Spock, Lt. Commander, Current Assignment - First Officer, Science Officer, Ship - *U.S.S. Enterprise*.

His eyes lightly scanned the printed information, but his mind wasn't really absorbing it. He already knew what the report said. He still didn't feel comfortable about Spock. Out of all the officers aboard the *Enterprise*, Spock was the one who worried him. Kirk had had limited exposure to Vulcans and he had found himself uncomfortable when he was with them. He liked to be open with the men under his command but he couldn't see that happening here, not if Spock had the normal Vulcan's almost disdainful attitude. He found himself getting irritated at Spock and then laughed at himself. He hadn't even met the man and he was already dressing him down.

But it was time to get moving - he had an appointment to keep. He picked up the dossier and headed back for his quarters.

Spock sat in his quarters fighting a slowly successful battle with his emotions. The Vulcan half was demanding calm, for if he gave in to his human heritage he would be pacing the floor. The viewscreen in front of him was activated and the information printed there concerned James Kirk.

Doubt nagged at the back of his mind. He couldn't get comfortable with the idea of Kirk as the commanding officer of the *Enterprise*. Kirk's age bothered him. The sometimes wild illogic of the human race was bad enough, but it was practically rampant in the younger humans - and Kirk was only thirty-two! He had not found many humans to be outstandingly competent, and from his inquiries about Kirk, the man seemed to be somewhat of a hot-head, stubborn, and ambitious. Somehow it didn't strike Spock as ideal material.

But - there was no questioning Kirk's achievements. The many decorations and citations spoke of a man of ability, of leadership, of command. It seemed almost a paradox. Spock liked things in black and white. There were too many shades of grey in Kirk's character for his liking.

The intercom rang. It was almost time for the new commanding officer to beam aboard. Spock quietly got to his feet and headed for the transporter room.

He passed by the open door of the captain's quarters with Kirk's possessions stacked neatly just inside. He had never been close to Pike, but at least he had been comfortable with him, knew what to expect and what was expected. He was not very comfortable about facing the unknown quantity called James Kirk.

Realizing he was going to be late, he moved to the turbo-lift. He was the last to arrive in the transporter room. The other department heads were already there - each looking expectant or nervous in their turn. Spock ordered the transporter to be activated.

The beam-up was completed quickly. A youthful figure stood on the platform and, for a small eternity in time, brown eyes locked with hazel ones. The time of anticipation was over. Concrete reality was in front of them.

Spock felt his heart sink as he looked over the man standing in front of him. Kirk was hardly more than a boy; even the wayward lock of hair falling forward over his face somehow underlined the fact. But there was something else, something Spock couldn't define. His eyes ran over the lean, muscled figure, the arms hanging relaxed by Kirk's side, the stance which was both at ease and professional. He looked up again and met those clear, inquiring eyes. They were sizing up the Vulcan but, as with any good commander, they did not disclose any thoughts or impressions. As they stood facing each other, Spock slowly became aware of the air of confidence and self-assurance that Kirk commanded. He suddenly found himself wondering what conclusion Kirk had drawn on his examination.



As yet, Kirk had drawn no conclusion. As the materialization process ended, he was aware of the presence of all the officers, but his eyes sought out only one. He wasn't hard to find.

His eyes took in a tall, slender man standing in front of the transporter console, his hands clasped behind his back. Their eyes met, but there was nothing showing out of the brown depths except perhaps the slightest hint of curiosity. As their eyes held, something Kirk couldn't define flickered in the Vulcan's eyes, then was gone. There was nothing in Spock's expression or attitude that revealed anything that he was thinking. Kirk tried to gauge what the Vulcan was feeling but immediately felt that it was useless. He may have been half human but that half must have been completely buried.



McCoy stood to one side and watched the two men. It was more than obvious that they were sizing each other up. McCoy knew Spock should have been in line for this position - that his qualifications warranted giving him the ship, and yet it had been given to Jim.

And he knew that Jim was worried about Spock. Not only because he had taken command of a ship that should have been the Vulcan's, but because Spock was a Vulcan.

"I'm going to have to earn his support, Bones," Kirk had said to him a few days earlier. "If the *Enterprise* is going to be a good ship, I've got to have Spock's backing all the way. If there's friction at the top it will destroy everything."

Looking at the carefully neutral expression on Spock's face, McCoy wondered how Kirk would ever crack that exterior to find the man below the surface.



The examination seemed to have been ended by mutual agreement. Each man had made his initial judgment of the other but was biding his time before acting on that judgment. Those watching could not tell if any decision had been made on either side.

They were left no time for speculation. Spock stepped forward, his hand raised in the ancient Vulcan greeting. Kirk was momentarily nonplused for he knew that the greeting was used rarely except among Vulcans themselves.

"Live long and prosper, Captain Kirk, I turn command over to you, sir, and welcome you aboard the

Enterprise."

The voice reaching Kirk's ears was neutral and seemed to hold no resentment. Kirk's eyes never left Spock's face but a small, proud smile touched the corners of his mouth. His ship - he was finally aboard her!

Suddenly he felt that everything would be all right - that this crew would continue to work well, that he could iron out any differences he ran into with Spock. Indeed, the Vulcan himself had taken the first step in that direction by the form of his greeting. Looking around, Kirk knew that this was where he belonged - he was home.

None of that showed on his face or in his voice.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Looking at the others standing there, his smile widened. "Well, gentlemen, shall we get to work?"



The Beginning



The giant ship slipped silently through space, her destination the little explored planet of Dimorus. A research team had been stationed there for the past six months and was due to return to Starbase 12. As that particular Starbase was also the command base of the starship *Enterprise*, and since she was due in for routine maintenance, it was a simple task for her to stop long enough to pick them up.

A youthful figure walked through the darkened corridors. His duty shift had long since ended, but he was conducting his self-appointed tour - in a way tucking his lady in for the night. The older crew members still got a chuckle out of their young Captain's nightly routine, but they appreciated his concern for what was so much a part of them all.

James T. Kirk had served as Captain of the *Enterprise* for barely a month and as yet not many of the crew knew him very well, save Gary Mitchell, who had known him before they were assigned to the *Enterprise*. They all knew of him, all knew of his extraordinary rise through command rank to finally become, at thirty-two, the youngest man ever to command a starship.

They found him to be a firm, decisive leader who wore his authority like a mantle. He was a good deal younger than most of his senior officers, something which had never happened before in anyone's memory. In no way did this diminish their respect for him; he knew his job, he knew how to control men under his command, and he showed all too readily what so many commanders lacked - understanding and compassion for the men under him.

Satisfied that all was well, he dropped into the rec room, knowing that Mark Piper would be nursing his usual nightcap, probably keeping Montgomery Scott company. Kirk had never met anyone with Scotty's enormous capacity who managed to stay completely sober. When he first saw the Scot's nightly consumption he almost moved to stop it, but Piper had intervened.

"Don't worry, Captain," came the cheerful response, "Scotty's got a stomach like a sponge; you'll never find him less than competent no matter what the crisis - give him a chance." So against his better judgement Kirk had kept silent, and so far Piper had proved correct. The more he came to know his chief engineer the more he respected him and the fonder he felt toward him. Scotty's affection was growing in return for the "young lad" who had been assigned as his commanding officer. He was much more friendly than Chris Pike had ever been, and took more interest in Scotty and his great love, the engineering section.

Both Scotty and Piper were at their usual table, deep in conversation. A few other crew members were scattered around the room. Gary Mitchell was among the missing. Kirk pulled up a chair, smiling, refusing an offer of Saurian brandy.

"Ach, Captain, you should try some Scotch, keeps a man healthy."

Kirk grinned. "Scotty, if I tried to keep up with you I wouldn't have to turn off the *Enterprise*'s artificial gravity, I'd just float around the ship!"

Scotty snorted into his drink. Kirk took the opportunity to ask where Mitchell was.

"I think he's after your yeoman, Captain," said Piper, "the one with the difficult name."

Kirk's eyebrows rose. "You mean Jones?"

Piper chuckled. "I mean Smith. I think you've got some mental hangup about that girl. Not only is she scared half to death of you, but you get so exasperated when she corrects you. Now if she had some easy name, like 'Atienza', you'd probably have no trouble remembering it and a hot romance at the same time."

"Very funny," said Kirk with a twinge of irritation in his voice. It did bother him that he could never remember his yeoman's name, the same way it bothered him that she was never around when he needed her and always in

the way when she wasn't wanted.

"How long before we get to Starbase 12?" asked Piper, changing the subject.

Kirk leaned back in his chair. "We pick up the scientific team tomorrow and will be at the Starbase in three days. Why?"

"Oh, just looking forward to a little shore leave. Shipboard life can be a bit hard on a man after a while." A conspiring gleam passed between Kirk and Piper, each fully aware of what the other was thinking.

"I agree, Doctor," said Scotty solemnly, "I just received a huge package of technical tapes, a good solid week of reading - I can hardly wait..." He silently endured the burst of laughter from his companions. His comment was so far from what they had been thinking about that the simple statement practically doubled them over.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Kirk noticed a dark, disapproving stare from a corner of the room. As their eyes met, Spock quickly looked away and went back to the chess game he was playing with the computer. Kirk sat looking thoughtfully at the Vulcan who took no further notice of the others.

"Scotty," he said, turning to the Scot, "does Spock have any friends, anyone he sees outside of duty hours?"

The engineer glanced over at the spare figure in blue who was concentrating his attention on the chess board in front of him. "None that I know of, Captain. He used to occasionally accompany Captain Pike on shore leave. Sometimes he'll play a weird looking instrument in the rec room, but otherwise he keeps pretty much to himself. Vulcans don't mix very well with humans, I guess."

Piper watched Kirk as he gazed at Spock. He knew the Captain was toying with an idea. He had seen the mutual respect grow between Kirk and Spock over the few weeks that Kirk had been in command of the *Enterprise*, but it didn't seem in Kirk's nature not to delve and probe into a man's psyche - to find out what made him tick. He glanced over at the Vulcan. *You've got a tough nut to crack this time, Jim*, he thought. *I know the lengths you've gone to to win this crew, but Spock's only half-human, and I know that half feels inferior. I don't know if even your persistence can get through that shell.*

Apparently Kirk was going to try. He stood up and excused himself, then walked over to where Spock was sitting. The Vulcan glanced up, not seeming in the least surprised to see Kirk standing there.

"Mind if I join you, Mr. Spock? I haven't played chess for a long time, thought I might be able to pick up a few pointers..."

At this point Piper stopped listening in. He knew that Kirk was a top chess player and it was absolutely none of his business what he wanted to discuss with the Vulcan. Besides, he had a couple of tests that needed to be checked in the lab before he went to bed. He stood up and Scotty joined him. The engine room would also have a final going-over before it was completely settled for the night.

Spock politely invited Kirk to join him in a game. "The computer is a challenge, Captain, but since I programmed it for chess myself, the game normally ends in a draw. The pattern differs, but the end result is usually the same."

Kirk grinned. "Well, I doubt if I could give you the same challenge as the computer, Mr. Spock, but I'm willing to take a stab at it."

Kirk proceeded to play the game of his life. He wasn't just playing a game, he was introducing himself to a man he had a great deal of difficulty trying to understand. For a while he played as he had been taught the game should be played, with foresight and logic, but after a while he discovered that if he kept it up, he would be soundly beaten. So he changed to his normal game of sheer daring which had proved so successful in the past. Spock watched in growing astonishment as his carefully plotted game was totally demolished. He conceded Kirk's checkmate with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"I am not familiar with that particular maneuver, Captain," he said, reaching out to rearrange the chessmen in their original positions.

Kirk gave back the various pieces he had captured during the game. "Neither am I, Spock. I think it is normally referred to as a 'Kirk Kink' by my previous chess partner."

"Indeed," replied Spock.

Kirk glanced around to discover they were the only ones left in the rec room. He had been so absorbed in the game he had not noticed the others leaving. He stretched, then got to his feet. "Guess I'll check the bridge, then turn in."

Spock looked up at him. "The crew is in auxiliary control on third shift, Captain. There is no one on the bridge."

Kirk flushed a little, knowing there was probably no way he could explain to this man what he felt about the ship and the control center that was now so much a part of his life. Before he could reply, Spock had risen to his feet.

"However, if you do not mind company, there are a couple of instruments I do wish to check. I am not completely satisfied with their operation..." He stood respectfully, his hands behind his back, waiting for an answer.

Kirk gazed at him, his hazel eyes thoughtful. Was there something behind the simple comment, or was he just trying to get something out of the Vulcan that wasn't there?

"I'd be pleased to have you accompany me, Mr. Spock," he said, using a tone as formal as the Vulcan's. Two could play at that game.

The bridge was dimly lit by the glowing instruments from various panels. Spock went immediately to the science station and started fiddling with the equipment. Kirk watched him for a few moments, then stepped quietly down to the command chair. He stood for several seconds with his hand on the back of the chair. He still couldn't quite get rid of the ridiculous feeling he got every time he walked onto the bridge - his bridge. He moved over to the navigator's station and activated the main screen. The familiar stars twinkled into existence, the ship's fleeting movement making them seem as though they were slipping past the lights of a city. Kirk couldn't begin to count the number of times he had stood watching the stars, and he knew he never would tire of it.

Spock finished his work and turned to see what Kirk was doing. He sat studying the human for a long moment. He had never been close to anyone - had occasionally felt the need but he had never had the opportunity - his mixed heritage kept an invisible barrier between himself and others. Yet he was certain tonight that James Kirk had not only wanted to play chess. He was aware that the Captain had been studying him during the past weeks, and Spock had found that he had been accorded the same open friendliness that Kirk gave everyone else. The fact that Spock was an alien didn't seem to make any difference.

Spock was intrigued by his new commanding officer. He was a bit surprised at the openness of Kirk's character; he made little effort to hide his feelings; he was quick to laugh; he was as close to a tease as Spock had ever met, although he had never been at the receiving end of the gentle teasing. He was also an exacting commander who expected top efficiency. He had a charisma which brought a degree of loyalty that Spock had not seen before in a human crew. He could understand it from a Vulcan crew, but humans were unpredictable, and their conflicting emotions often got in the way of efficiency.

Spock had also discovered that Kirk had a temper. It rarely surfaced; he never once had been heard to raise his voice, but an icy look from those highly expressive eyes accomplished far more than a tongue-lashing. The angrier he was the quieter his voice became. Once Spock had been witness to the reprimanding of a junior officer who had failed to follow up on one of Kirk's orders. Neither of them would ever forget it.

Kirk swung around, flicking off the screen as he did so. Standing in the gloom he looked so young, it was almost ridiculous to think that he could shoulder the burdens of starship command. Then those eyes held the Vulcan's - those eyes so experienced in so young a face. Spock rose to his feet.

"You come to watch the stars often, Captain?" The question was polite, no curiosity, almost a simple statement. Kirk was a little puzzled. When he had first turned and his eyes had met Spock's, he was sure he had seen a fleeting look of something he couldn't define. Did the Vulcan see the stars as he did? Would he understand if Kirk decided to try to explain? The human smiled slightly. Probably not.

"Not as often as I would like to, Mr. Spock. Time doesn't seem to be my own any more..." A wistful look crossed his face at some distant memory.

"Command does rule one's life," Spock said quietly. Kirk looked at him sharply but the Vulcan's eyes seemed to look past him. "It sets that person apart, he is different from others, irreversibly different..." Spock broke off, not sure why he had spoken those words. He looked back at Kirk.

"Is that why you refused command, Spock? I know you could have had the *Enterprise*, if you had gone for the assignment."

Spock stood up, silently flicking off some of the computer systems which were not necessary for the third shift. He felt a strange urge to talk to Kirk, yet he knew he wouldn't. He had kept his feelings to himself for too many years. He stood with head bowed for a few seconds, then turned to the younger man.

"Captain, I don't need command for that to happen..."

The hazel eyes softened as the impact of Spock's words sank in. Spock was uncomfortable. He didn't know why he had said to Kirk words he had never uttered to another living soul. Kirk seemed to sense his confusion, for he didn't pursue the subject. He glanced at the chronometer.

"If you and I are going to be any good on the job tomorrow, Spock, I think we'd better get to bed." Silently they took the short ride on the turbolift to Deck 5, Spock grateful that Kirk seemed lost in his own thoughts. He had said something he now wished he hadn't. He disliked exposing any break in the Vulcan facade, and he had the feeling that if anyone could crack his barriers against the outside world, it would be this man.

He didn't realize how much his answer troubled Kirk, and Kirk didn't know why. He had met many lonely people in his career - military life made it almost impossible to sustain any lasting friendships. People moved around too much. He was lucky - he had Leonard McCoy. Although they met only infrequently, McCoy looked out for him almost like a father in the times when things really got rough. Kirk wondered if Spock had ever had anyone like that.

The turbolift door swished open to reveal Gary Mitchell and a couple of his friends merrily singing as they made their way along the corridor. Immediately Spock withdrew, and Kirk felt the slight communication they had shared being withdrawn as well. The others came up, Gary clapping Kirk on the shoulder. "Missed you tonight, Captain; you starting to miss dinner on a regular schedule?"

Spock turned to Kirk. "If you will excuse me, sir, I have some work in my quarters."

Kirk nodded, and Spock left the group standing in front of the turbolift. The other two men took their leave - unlike Mitchell, they were still slightly in awe of their commanding officer.

"Want a nightcap, Gary?"

"Sure could use one, Jim. Man, that yeoman of yours is really something..." He noted the coldness that met that remark, and knew he had hit a topic that was better left alone.

Kirk poured out the brandy, then sat down on the edge of the bed, Gary taking up his usual position on the floor. Mitchell never sat on anything other than the floor if he had any choice in the matter. He took a swallow of his drink, his eyes never leaving Kirk's face. He had known him for a long time, and was very good at reading his moods. At the moment, his friend seemed troubled about something.

"Come on, Jim, out with it. What's wrong?"

A fleeting smile crossed Kirk's face. "Nothing's wrong, Gary, I just get hit occasionally with the enormity of the job..." He looked at his friend. If Gary Mitchell ever achieved a captaincy, that enormity was something that would never bother him. Gary was a competent officer, but cold. Emotion was something that rarely got in his way. *I wonder if that would impair his effectiveness*, Kirk thought to himself. *Could a commanding officer be as good without it?*

"Hey, snap out of it, friend, you're giving me the willies with that stare!"

Kirk laughed. "Sorry, just daydreaming..." He grew serious. "Gary, what do you think of Spock?"

Mitchell looked surprised. "Spock? Well, I'd say he's a computer masquerading as a science officer."

Kirk frowned slightly. Again he was aware of a crucial element missing in Mitchell's character. "Nothing else?"

"Heck, Jim, I've got enough to do without trying to analyze that alien. He's efficient, logical, and he doesn't like humans. Anything else?"

Kirk finished his drink. "No, that probably sums it up." He stood up. "We'd better turn in, Gary, or Piper will have us on the carpet again."

He stood looking at the closed door, seeing both Mitchell and Spock. He had been friends with Gary for a long time, and together they had done some fast living. He was a dependable, efficient officer and a loyal friend. But recently Kirk felt as though he was seeing a different Mitchell; this one was cold and ruthless, a man who tended to use and discard people as the mood moved him. Kirk knew that he himself was changing, moving now in a different direction, having to know and analyze the men under his command. Was he now seeing something in Gary that was being brought out as their relationship altered? Maybe he should have a talk with Piper; he could usually shed some light on such problems. Kirk thanked his lucky stars that he had inherited Mark. How often over the past weeks had that gruff man steered him on the right course. However, there would be times when he wouldn't be able to help, times when to be a humanist would only complicate the matter, times when only sticking to strict military procedure would solve a problem. It was then when Kirk would need someone else, and he had no one - Mitchell was definitely not the man. However, it wasn't worth worrying about now. Tomorrow they would pick up the men on Dicosus, then Starbase 12. Within minutes, Kirk was in bed and asleep.



Spock sat gazing at the flamepot, the light reflecting from the red curtains which decorated the Vulcan's living quarters. He was disturbed. He had turned to a human tonight for the first time since he had last cried in his mother's arms. He was troubled not so much by the fact that he had done it, but more from the effect that Kirk was having on him. He had never felt this with Captain Pike, although he had known him for a long time. Pike was a loner much the same as Spock, and they had been content with their distant relationship. Kirk was so different. He had not tried to impose on the Vulcan's privacy; he had always been courteous and friendly in his dealings with him, yet Spock felt as though Kirk had held out something. Was it something he needed, or something he felt the Vulcan needed? The not knowing bothered him.

He thought back over the past weeks. He knew he was more aware of Kirk than he had ever been of Pike. He

watched his actions in quiet times, his efficiency in the everyday crises which followed all starships. He had noticed that Kirk tended to be a little incautious, was too quick to be the one who responded to the danger. He was not a commander who sent others into a situation he would not face. Was it the recklessness of youth, the faults of inexperience, or a part of the man which would always cause him to be in the thick of things?

Spock found himself trying to anticipate the somewhat illogical reactions of his Captain, and several times had stepped between him and some possible disaster. Then, on the Canopus planet only a week ago, the position had been reversed. Spock, absorbed by something registering on his tricorder, had almost stepped into the treacherous sulphur quicksands. With a yell and a flying tackle, Kirk had knocked Spock flat on his back, but not in time to stop both of them from getting caught. Quick work by the others of the landing party had prevented a very unpleasant end. When Spock had pointed out that Kirk had only needed to yell, and not place himself in such a position, Kirk had only chuckled.

"Mr. Spock, I have been told by my instructors at the Academy, by my superior officers aboard ship, and now by you, that it is not necessary to keep getting into trouble. Somehow I just keep on doing it." The subject had been dropped, but the words had made a deep impression on Spock, and he would always be sure in the future that he would be within grabbing distance if the need arose.



Standard orbit was established around Dimorus, and contact made with the scientists stationed there. As he had found with all scientific men, they were not ready to leave the planet; in fact, they had hardly begun to pack their records. They eagerly accepted Kirk's offer of assistance, and he sent down a team of technicians who would be able to help without destroying everything the scientists had collected during their stay.

As time dragged on, Kirk found himself getting restless. He had been looking forward to beating a hasty retreat to Starbase 12, and this delay was proving very frustrating. He swung to his feet.

"Mr. Spock, Mr. Mitchell, we are going to beam down."

Spock looked at him in surprise. "For what reason, Captain? We can find out nothing from this planet in so short a time that hasn't already been recorded..." He broke off, seeing Kirk's eyes darken. Now was not a good time to question his Captain's orders.

Kirk turned to his yeoman. "You, too, Yeoman." Glancing at Spock, he continued: "We might find something worth recording despite the doubts expressed by the Science Officer." He hit the intercom. "Dr. Piper, we're going planetside. Care to come along?"

"You giving me a choice, Captain?"

"Yes, Doctor, for once I am."

"Then, thanks, but I think I'll stay here. I've been working on some tests that I'd like to follow through."

Kirk chuckled as he turned the intercom off. He looked over at Lee Kelso. "Lee, you have the con - Scotty's off with a technical journal somewhere. Don't disturb him unless you have to. Contact us when the scientists are beamed aboard if we haven't come back first."

"Acknowledged, Captain."



The four of them materialized just outside the camp that the scientists had set up. They were surprised to see a crude defense line set up around the perimeter, long sticks with sharpened ends pointing outwards.

"Looks like pictures of those forts in Old Africa," commented Kirk to no one in particular. "Wonder what made it necessary?"

They entered the compound and soon were shaking hands with the scientific team they had been sent to pick up.

"Why the poles, gentlemen?" asked Kirk curiously.

"Just a precaution, Captain. Most things on this planet make it a perfect place to set up a colony, except for..." He hesitated for a moment.

"Except for what?" asked Kirk.

"Well, there's a rodent-like creature with prehensile claws who lives here; we haven't been able to get close enough to do any real study, and we haven't been able to capture one. We think they're intelligent. They live in a loose type of society, and for the most part seem willing to keep to themselves."

"For the most part?" echoed Mitchell.

"Occasionally, and for reasons we can't figure out, they mount an attack. They use a weapon like a blowgun - poison darts. We don't know what kind of poison; it evaporates quickly if it doesn't enter the bloodstream, but if it does, it's deadly. Some of our test animals were killed and when we did an autopsy, we could find traces of some kind of poison, but not enough to be able to identify it. I doubt if you'll have to worry, though; they're rarely around during the day."

"Well then," said Kirk, "let's do a little exploring."

They set off, Kirk busily surveying the unfamiliar territory, Mitchell surveying the yeoman, and Spock glued to his tricorder. Kirk glanced at the Vulcan and smiled. Spock had complained about the unnecessary beamdown, but was now totally caught up in his investigation, his insatiable curiosity once again having gotten the better of him.

"Jim," said Mitchell, "if you don't need us, mind if we do a little exploring of our own?" Kirk glanced at the yeoman, who was studying her feet as if she had just discovered that she had them.

"All right, Gary. Just keep your eyes open." He watched them disappear, then turned to see what Spock was up to, but the Vulcan was busy sorting out some soil samples. Sighing to himself, he decided to plunge on - he had suggested this, he might as well enjoy it.

He soon came on a clearing ringed by the tall, thin trees that grew in abundance on the planet. There was a pool in the middle of the clearing - small, violet-colored flowers grew in profusion around it. Silence abounded, making Kirk feel a bit on edge. He couldn't remember hearing any bird or insect life since he had left the others. He felt the hair rising on the back of his neck. He knew he was in danger, but he didn't know from what, or where it would be coming from. He quietly walked forward, taking out his phaser and setting it on heavy stun. There was still nothing visible. He took out his communicator and flipped it open.

"Kirk to Mitchell. Gary, come in...Gary..."

"Yes, Captain..."

Kirk felt relieved to be in contact with someone. "Gary, something's wrong here. I can't see anything, but there's danger. Contact Spock; get here as fast as you can. I'll leave my communicator open so you can find me."

"Be there in a second, Jim. Mitchell out."

Kirk stood tensely waiting, the silence of the small glade pounding in his ears. The minutes passed like hours, and then he saw them, the rodent-like creatures the scientists had reported. They ringed the small clearing. *Probably about ten of them*, thought Kirk, doing a quick estimate. He tried to edge toward the trees, but they moved to cut him off. A couple started forward. Remembering that the scientists had said the creatures might be intelligent, Kirk decided to try to reason with them.

"I mean you no harm; we're here to pick up the scientists that have been stationed back there..." The creatures took no notice of his words and kept advancing. Kirk lifted his phaser a little higher. "We do not like to kill, but we will defend ourselves..." The creatures kept coming. Kirk had no choice - he fired. The creatures crumpled at his feet.

"Jim - look out!" Kirk spun around to see Gary Mitchell racing across the glade, the yeoman hot on his heels. He saw the blowgun the same time as Mitchell did. Gary swerved and dived at the rodent, taking the dart intended for Kirk.

"Gary!" Kirk dashed forward, falling to his knees as a blinding blue flash lit the area. A second one followed almost immediately, and Kirk vaguely saw Spock as he spun and fired on another advance. Kirk grabbed his communicator.

"Enterprise - lock on and beam up four. Medical emergency!" He picked Gary up and half-stumbled over to Spock and the yeoman. The transporter beam caught them almost immediately.

Piper met them in the transporter room. "Poison, Doctor," said Spock, "unknown variety, kills on entering the bloodstream."

"My fault," muttered Kirk, laying the pale body of his friend on the waiting stretcher. "My fault..."

Suddenly the scream of red alert sounded. Kirk hit the communications button. "Kirk here."

"Kelso, sir. Ion storm approaching fast - a huge one..."

Beam, thought Kirk, *what else can go wrong?* Aloud he said, "Get those men off that planet as fast as you can. Beam the whole blasted camp up if you have to! Spock, with me..." He touched Piper on the shoulder as he passed. "Mark, do what you can." The doctor looked at him sympathetically. Mitchell was Kirk's one real friend on board the Enterprise - this was going to be rough.

The next few hours were a struggle. They didn't get the scientists off the planet soon enough to be able to outrun the storm. Everyone's nerves were on edge as the ship battled with the awesome force of the ion storm. Spock watched his Captain struggle for the life of his ship, and share in the struggle for the life of his friend. A small part of Spock wondered what it would be like to have such a friendship, where one person cared so much for the other.



They made it. There was a lot of damage, some systems were out completely, others were working on manual control, but they had survived. They had survived because they were led by a tremendous tactician. Even Spock had felt the situation to be completely hopeless at times, yet Kirk would come up with another maneuver which kept the

Enterprise from being split wide open.

As soon as it was safe, Kirk felt Spock in command and headed for Sickbay. The news was not good.

"I honestly don't know, Captain. I've never seen poison like this. I've pumped Gary full of everything I can think of; the labs are working full out to find an antidote. I've put him on complete life-support to help sustain the weakened autonomic reflexes. That's about all I can do."



Spock found him, hours later, sitting alone on the steps of the darkened bridge. Again the stars were flashing by on the viewscreen, but Kirk didn't seem to see them, nor did he acknowledge Spock's presence. Spock stood uncertainly for a few moments, then sat down on the steps beside Kirk. Still there was no acknowledgement of his being there. They sat side by side in the gloom, a large distance of silence separating them.

Then Kirk sighed. "It should never have happened, Spock. There was no reason for it - we didn't have to go down, we weren't going to accomplish anything by it. My fault - I'm always doing stupid, impetuous things. Why did it have to be Gary? What will I do if he dies?" He buried his head in his hands.

Spock looked at the viewscreen, at the silent stars in their familiar pattern. They had been there for eons of time before this moment, and would probably be there for eons after. He looked again at his Captain. What could he say to this human? He knew he had to say something.

"Captain, the main purpose of Starfleet is scientific exploration, to contact new life. We are seeking the unknown, and the unknown is always dangerous. You were curious about a world. Curiosity is what drew mankind into space in the first place. This was not the first time we have beamed down to a planet where we were reasonably sure we would find little of value. This is not the first time a man is fighting for his life because of the decision of a superior officer, nor will it be the last. Mitchell did nothing you would not have done had the positions been reversed..."

A signal from Sickbay broke in. "Piper to Kirk..."

"You can relax, Captain; we've isolated the poison and found an antidote. Gary will live - he'll feel rotten for a while, but he'll make it."

Kirk stood gripping the edge of the command chair, his knuckles showing white as he struggled to control himself, yet his voice was quiet and firm when he finally replied. "Thanks, Mark, I appreciate your efforts..."

"Anytime, Captain, although I'm getting past the age where I like these rush jobs. Piper out."

Kirk stood holding onto the command chair as if it were the one solid reality in his life. Spock quietly stood up. Kirk's eyes met his. Spock drew a deep breath. "Captain, there is now a known antidote for the poison darts of Diaporus. That in itself will help make possible the colonization of the planet when it becomes necessary. If this incident had not happened, the knowledge would not now be known, and the planet would remain a danger. Today's incident was not totally without benefits."

Kirk turned away from the Vulcan to look at the viewscreen, then flicked it off. "That's where we differ, Spock. You can see the value of an experiment - I see the uselessness of almost losing a life." He turned back to the Vulcan. "Is that what makes us different, Spock? Is that what holds us apart, Humans from Vulcans, Vulcans from Andorians, Andorians from Tellerites? Is it because our standards and priorities are so different, that we can never reach that hoped-for goal of the Federation - to truly become brothers? We have peace among our peoples, but do we really have understanding?"

Spock's dark eyes held Kirk's. The Captain had asked him something that was almost impossible to answer. He knew he did not see things as Kirk did - often he did not understand why Kirk did the things he did. He knew that Kirk didn't understand him either, although he certainly tried. Kirk's eyes were still on him, and he felt compelled to answer.

"You talk about the understanding of worlds, Captain. May I suggest something else - the understanding of an individual must come first. It is perhaps more complicated, but once accomplished, can lead to the ideal of which you speak."

Kirk found himself holding his breath. The day before he had held out his hand - tonight Spock had answered. Suddenly Gary's close brush with death became only that - his feeling of guilt faded. He stood now looking at a man who seemed able to speak his words, who understood his goals. Would he be the one who could share his life? Only the future would tell, the future full of dangerous unknowns, thrilling victories, crushing defeats; but it would be a future that could be shared, if he could keep open the tenuous line of communication to this strange, puzzling alien. He started up the steps, then turned to meet Spock face to face.

"I agree, Mr. Spock, understanding the individual is important. Are you willing?"

Something in the Vulcan's dark eyes flickered, a look close to fear flashing bright, then disappearing. For a long time Spock stood motionless, then a slight incline of his head gave Kirk his answer. Together they entered the turbolift, leaving the bridge to its quiet darkness.

We Do Our Best

It was written somewhere in the Starfleet directives that, upon occasion, members of a starship crew would be cited for actions above and beyond the call of duty. It was because of such an action that the senior officers of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* were gathered at Command Headquarters to be recognized for their gallantry.

McCoy surveyed the others. The general opinion as they had made their way to the auditorium earlier was that they would all rather be somewhere else, but no one seemed to be suffering. Indeed, that emotion would be difficult to feel with the amount of praise that was being heaped upon them. He dug his elbow into Lt. Commander Scott's side.

"I wonder if Vulcans get swelled heads?" he remarked in a loud whisper.

Dark, disapproving eyes turned his way and McCoy grinned wickedly. He couldn't resist baiting the Vulcan, even at a time like this. Then he noticed Kirk looking at him as well. "Whoops," he thought. "I must have been a bit louder than I meant to be." He glanced furtively at Admiral Sommers but he evidently had not heard.

Scotty was shifting restlessly. "I've got to get back to the *Enterprise* soon, Doctor," he grumbled. "There's a lot of repair work to be done. Some sections need a complete overhaul, especially the laundry - something keeps happening to the cleaning unit..."

As the ceremony came to an end he broke off, and gratefully accepted the best part - good drink. It was also accompanied by good food and conversation but they didn't stand first in Scotty's mind. Finally they were heading back to the transporter center and the ship, their next destination being R & R on Rigel 11. Each was looking forward to the rest.



Jim Kirk arrived on the bridge in time to receive a less-than-welcome message from Headquarters. Before leaving orbit, Commodore Brenner would be joining them as a special observer.

"Great," thought Kirk. "I'm tired, the crew is tired - all we need is a nit-picking perfectionist. I don't think I'm going to be able to stand it. At least he won't have any authority while on board." Aloud he said, Lt. Uhura, contact Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott. Tell the transporter room to stand ready."

Leaving Sulu in charge, he took the turbolift to Deck 5. As it descended, he mentally reviewed the long list of repair work that Scotty had given to him earlier. There was nothing major that required an overhaul, but a lot of little things that always seemed to fall apart at the same time. Scotty had tried to explain something about the food processor, but Kirk hadn't understood and, he decided with a grin, Brenner would understand it even less. As far as the Commodore was concerned, things worked properly - period.

As the turbolift doors opened, Kirk immediately sensed that the next two days were going to be a disaster. His first officer was coming down the corridor and his uniform shirt could have held four of him.

"Spock..."

"The laundry unit has malfunctioned, Captain," explained Spock with no change of expression. "It is sending back all uniforms in this condition."

"Well," said Kirk, "I would suggest you tuck the surplus into your pants. Maybe that would look better." Surveying the end result, Kirk smiled. "Now you just look like you've ended a severe diet. Come on, we're going to miss the bean up."

They arrived in the transporter room just as Scotty began to operate the transporter controls. As the Commodore materialized onto the platform, Kirk began his welcoming speech. Scotty, who had been readjusting some of the settings on the transporter console, suddenly sneezed, accidentally pulling down the levers. The Commodore was

sent back to Starbase 4. Spock's eyebrow lifted as he looked at the empty transporter platform.

"Mr. Scott, I believe that if you place your finger under your nose when you feel a sneeze approaching, you will find it avoids such awkward situations as we are now in," he commented to a red-faced engineer.

"It's all right, Scotty," said Kirk, as the culprit tried to apologize. "Re-energize."

Once again, the Commodore materialized and this time hastily stepped off the platform, his face showing his irritation. Trying to be diplomatic, Kirk stepped forward and shook hands, apologizing for the accidental beam down. Brenner blustered a little but Kirk gave him no chance to start berating anyone.

"Commodore, I would like to present my First Officer, Commander Spock." Brenner stared in disbelief at Spock's ill-fitting uniform.

"Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*, Commodore," said Spock, giving him the Vulcan salute. Brenner tried to return it, unsuccessfully, which furthered his irritation.

Turning to introduce Scotty, Kirk found that the engineer had slipped out unnoticed. *Probably too embarrassed to stay*, he thought.

"Commodore," said Kirk, "Mr. Spock will accompany you to your quarters. I have a few things to attend to before we leave orbit."

"Of course, Captain. Just treat me as part of the woodwork on this trip. I am here solely to observe." Kirk smiled grimly to himself - he would like to put Brenner into the woodwork rather than to treat him as part of it.

Kirk took a turbolift to the bridge. Spock hesitated at the door of another. It had been operating erratically in the past few days but as it was the only one available, he ushered the commodore in.

"Deck 3," he ordered. The turbolift immediately descended to Engineering - the manual override doing absolutely no good. No amount of effort would move it upward.

Brenner stood by impatiently while Spock worked on the stubborn controls. Finally he said, "Well, Mr. Spock, as long as we're in Engineering, maybe I can have a look around." Spotting the Chief Engineer's office, he barged in without knocking. Scotty was there. In fact, he had just poured himself a Scotch to soothe his shattered nerves and was in the process of downing it when the commodore burst in. They stared at each other for what, to Scott, seemed an eternity before Spock's calm voice broke into the silence.

"Lt. Commander Scott is suffering from an extremely bad cold resulting from severe exposure during the last mission. The ship's doctor prescribed liquid medication as the most satisfactory way of breaking up the congestion."

Both Brenner and Scotty looked at Spock in astonishment. "Mr. Scott," continued the Vulcan, "the commodore would like to see your Engineering section. Would you please be so kind as to escort him."

Putting down his glass, Scotty took the commodore and disappeared into the depths of Engineering. Spock took this free time to find a uniform which would fit, and after a long hunt he was finally successful.

Commodore Brenner and Spock arrived on the bridge together. While Kirk was showing Brenner the command center of the huge starship, an emergency call came blasting over the intercom from Sickbay.

"I need help!" someone gasped.

"Sulu, take over. Spock, come with me." Kirk was disappearing fast into the turbolift, with Spock and Brenner right behind him. Arriving in Sickbay, he called out, "Bones, where are you?"

"In here," a shaky voice yelled from the adjoining room.

They ran to the next room. After an astounded moment, Kirk burst into laughter, Spock looked pained, and Brenner seemed stunned. The ship's chief medical officer was stuck on one of his diagnostic beds, which was flapping up and down wildly.

"It's not funny!" gasped McCoy. "Do something! I'm going to be killed!"

Spock tried some switches to no avail. Finally, he timed the motion of the waving bed and managed to pull McCoy off.

"Bones, what were you doing?" Kirk demanded.

"Well, things were slow around here so I decided to take a nap."

Kirk noticed Brenner's look of disbelief at what McCoy was saying and suppressed a grin.

"...As soon as I lay down, that stupid bed went berserk. It was moving too fast to get off."

"I believe there is a crack in the casing," said Spock, emerging from under the structure. "I would suggest someone attend to it before you use it again, Doctor. Not everyone would have the strength to hold on as long as you did."

McCoy bristled at the tone in Spock's voice. "Thank you, Mr. Spock," he replied icily, "I'll see to it."

Nodding formally, and smiling inwardly, Spock returned to the bridge.



It was the end of the watch and crew members were heading for dinner. Kirk accompanied Brenner to the mess

hall and directed him to the food processor. The commodore punched his tape into the slot and, before Kirk had a chance to move, the processor threw mashed potatoes right into Brenner's face. Restraining a smile, Kirk apologized. "I'm terribly sorry, sir, the processor quite often gets carried away and throws the food around. The engineers have tried to fix it but so far nothing has worked."

Wiping potato off his face, Brenner grunted non-committally and gathered the rest of his meal. They joined Scott and McCoy, who had already started their dinner, and in a few minutes Spock arrived to complete the group. The meal passed with no further mishap, and conversation centered around the life of a starship officer - good talk with a group of amiable men. Commodore Brenner found himself enjoying his meal more than he had for a long time.

After dinner they adjourned to the rec room. Spock and Brenner started a game of chess while McCoy happily discussed some research he had just completed with what he thought was a highly interested captain. However, after asking his opinion and getting no response, the doctor discovered that Kirk was sound asleep. Turning to the chess game, he found that Spock had checkmated Brenner in six moves. There seemed no reason to remain, so Spock escorted the commodore to his quarters while McCoy woke Kirk up and ordered him to bed - before he threw his back out from sleeping in such an unnatural position.



Just twelve more hours, thought Kirk as he accompanied Brenner on a tour of the ship, and we'll be at Rigel 11 and rid of this irritant. The tour was going from bad to worse. They visited the biochemistry lab and Brenner was impressed by the flurry of activity, but Kirk was horrified by the strange concoction that bubbled in a large vat. He suspected it wasn't a medical problem the staff was working on and made a mental note to see McCoy about it. The commodore didn't seem to notice, or maybe it was just that he was beyond being surprised by what he saw.

Their visit to the flight deck calmed Kirk's jangling nerves, for they inspected the shuttlecraft and discussed their operation with one of the flight engineers, a young man named Rawlings. He was on his toes and answered the commodore's questions with confidence. Leaving there, they passed the gym and heard the sound of what could be nothing less than full scale combat. Looking in, they discovered that Sulu was practicing with a saber and was forcing another crew member back toward the door, having knocked the saber from his opponent's hand. As the pair approached, Sulu tripped and fell flat on his face, nearly running the commodore through with his sword. Only quick action on the part of the captain prevented a very nasty accident.

"Mr. Sulu, be careful with that thing. How often have I told you to use a safety tip on all weapons?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Commodore, I didn't mean to..."

"I understand that, Lieutenant," the commodore replied. "I realize accidents can happen. As a matter of fact, I am expecting them to happen." His eyes bore into Kirk, who was looking acutely unhappy.

Mercifully, the intercom on the wall summoned Kirk to the bridge. Hitting the button, he acknowledged the call.

"Spock here, Captain. We are picking up a distress call from the freighter *Oregon*. It has a leak in the reactor chamber which fuels the ship. There is no way they can stop it and the engines will become super-critical within a half hour. We are the closest ship to it."

"How many men are aboard her, Spock?"

"One hundred seventeen, sir. Some are badly injured and the ship's doctor was killed in the initial blast."

"Signal red alert, Mr. Spock. Set course for the *Oregon*, warp 7. I'm on my way. Coming, Commodore?"

Hurrying through the corridors behind the captain, Brenner sensed a difference in the atmosphere of the *Enterprise*. A short while ago, the crew had been almost lax. Now they were heading for their stations with real purpose and everything was running with brisk efficiency.

Even as the turbolift doors opened, Kirk was asking questions and giving orders.

"Spock, how long before we arrive at the *Oregon*'s location?"

"Thirteen minutes, Captain."

"Lt. Uhura, contact Starfleet Command and advise them of our change in course, then get Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott up here on the double."

"Aye, sir."

Within minutes, the chief surgeon and engineer were on the bridge.

"Bones, the *Oregon* has lost her medical officer. I want you to take a team and beam aboard her as soon as we are within transporter range. Mr. Scott, I doubt if there is much that can be done with those engines but I want you aboard that freighter to find out. Hold her together, Scotty. We've got to get those men off."

"Aye, sir. I'll do my best."

"Jim," said McCoy, "by the time we arrive the whole crew might be affected by that radiation. It will take

time for the ventilation system to filter it out. We may be too late."

"Let's hope not, Bones. Keep your fingers crossed. Mr. Spock, you'll be in command here. I'd better go over with Scotty and see what I can do."

"Sir, I would suggest that it would be wiser if I go..."

"No, Spock, I need you here. If those engines explode...well, I need someone who can handle the *Enterprise* in a close proximity blast, someone who will look after her."

Spock hesitated. Kirk was the wrong one to go, it was too risky - too much could go wrong. Getting the crew off the *Oregon* was of vital importance at the moment, but not vital enough for Jim Kirk, one of only twelve star-ship captains, to lose his life. Spock started to speak, but was interrupted by Chekov.

"We are within transporter range, Captain."

"Lt. Uhura, open a hailing frequency."

"Hailing frequency open, sir. I have contact with their bridge."

"This is Captain James Kirk of the *Enterprise*. What is your situation?"

The screen showed a young man, obviously badly frightened but controlling himself well. "This is Lt. Strong, sir. We're in bad shape here - two-thirds of the crew were affected by the radiation before we got it under control - the rest are in engineering trying to patch up the mess."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. We're beaming over a medical team immediately. My chief engineer and I shall follow shortly. Kirk out." He hit the communicator button on the command chair. "Transporter room, is Dr. McCoy there?"

"Here, Jim."

"Beam over immediately, Doctor. They need your help."

"On my way, Captain. McCoy out."

Kirk noticed Spock's still disapproving look as he turned from the command chair. Signalling the Vulcan, they moved to a deserted section of the bridge.

"Well, Spock?"

"Captain, the situation aboard the *Oregon* requires an experienced medical team and a competent engineer. You do not fit in either category. Dr. McCoy has, by now, beamed over. Mr. Scott has a team standing by in the transporter room. It is a useless risk to go aboard."

"Spock, are you questioning my orders?"

"No, sir, I am questioning the use of unnecessary personnel. The fewer people we send over there, the more likely we shall be to get them back."

Impatiently, Kirk explained, "The *Oregon* is an old style freighter, commissioned almost fifty years ago. Her equipment is totally outdated - they don't even go over it in simulated practices at the Academy any more. It's just a page in a text book. But I served for nine months on that ship when I was a cadet, and I know those instruments forward and backward. I am not 'unnecessary personnel', Spock. I doubt if there is anyone else available that could pilot her." He turned away, preventing any further argument. "Mr. Spock, you have the con. Ready, Scotty?"

Spock started forward, then stopped. Kirk was right - he had knowledge at his fingertips that others would need a computer for. It didn't make his going any easier, but at least it was logical.

Brenner was in a turmoil. He was not entirely convinced by Kirk's reasoning and silently encouraged Spock to say something - anything - to discourage the captain. But the Vulcan, his face completely devoid of expression, merely stood aside and watched Kirk and Scotty leave.

A few minutes later the *Oregon* hailed.

"Things are bad here, Spock," said Kirk. "Scotty gives us about ten minutes before the engines go. He and the chief engineer have then stabilized for the moment. His team is back on the *Enterprise*. McCoy thinks he can get the stretcher cases off in that time. How are things over there?"

"Running smoothly, Captain, but..." he hesitated.

"I know, Spock, you're thinking of the danger should the *Oregon* explode."

"Precisely, Captain. We are too close not to be endangered by flying fragments and if anyone should be transporting at the time we are sure to lose them."

"Not a pleasant prospect, I agree. Scotty has rigged up a thirty second warning signal. Have engineering on standby, engines ready for top warp speed. The engines here are set for manual control - the automatic pilot isn't working. They should be able to go a little way before they blow."

"Jim, someone needs to be aboard the *Oregon* to initiate warp drive."

"That's an order, Spock, if I say go - then go - no turning back - is that understood?"

Spock understood only too well, but his reply showed nothing of what he was thinking. "Standing by, Captain," came his reply. With his hand still resting on the command console, he was contemplating the results of disobeying a direct order and beaming Kirk back to the *Enterprise*, when he was interrupted by a horrified Brenner.

"Mr. Spock, you can't let Kirk do that! He'll be killed!"

Spock stared at him in stony silence. The commodore could not know the raw nerve he had hit just below the passive exterior. Spock was torn, as he had been so many times before, between obeying orders with the knowledge that it could cost James Kirk his life, or to give in to the emotions he denied having.

He was spared the need of answering when Scotty came bursting onto the bridge. "You only have about three minutes, Mr. Spock. I did what I could with those engines, but they won't hold."

"Transporter room, how is the evacuation going?"

"Only about twelve more, Mr. Spock. Dr. McCoy and his people are already back with the worst of the wounded."

"Captain, beam-over almost completed. Mr. Scott advises two minutes, forty seconds before explosion."

"Acknowledged, Spock. I'm going to nudge this thing into forward and drift away from you - hopefully not out of transporter range. I'll keep my communicator open and when you have the last of the crew aboard, lock onto my co-ordinates. As soon as I'm aboard, warp out of here."

"Captain, we could beam you aboard now."

"No, we can't be sure where this ship will head without the automatic pilot. I don't want her any closer to the *Enterprise* than she already is. And who knows - maybe, just maybe for once Scotty will be wrong about an engine."

Spock looked across to where Scotty was standing and received a negative shake of the head. Where an engine and its reactions were concerned, Scotty never made a mistake. Spock knew this and was aware that Kirk also knew it. He would never understand irrational hope.

A glance at the viewscreen showed that Kirk had set the freighter in motion and suddenly, Spock made up his mind. Orders or no, he was going to beam Kirk back. He would have to face the captain's wrath later, but at least Kirk would be alive to administer that wrath.

"Transporter room. Mr. Kyle, lock onto Captain Kirk's co-ordinates and beam him aboard immediately."

As he gave the order, the turbolift doors opened and McCoy stepped out. He had the preliminary reports ready for the captain concerning the wounded from the *Oregon*. As he handed them to Spock, he noticed the tension. *This is more than just the freighter*, he thought to himself.

"What's going on, Scotty?" he asked in a low whisper.

"The captain and Spock just had a wee disagreement, Doctor. There's going to be trouble in a minute."

Mr. Kyle reported over the intercom, "We have him, sir. He's on his way to the bridge."

"Very well, Lieutenant, continue beaming the others over. Notify me the minute everyone is aboard."

There was not long to wait but it seemed forever. Then Kyle informed him, "We have them all, sir."

"Mr. Sulu, warp 6. Get us out of here."

As he gave the order, Spock heard the swish of the turbolift door and Kirk's voice.

"Spock, explain."

The Vulcan turned and was about to answer when the shock waves caused by the explosion of the *Oregon* hit the *Enterprise*. Bodies went flying. When things settled down, the commodore found himself in the doorway of the turbolift, wedged in by Kirk and Spock. McCoy had landed in the command chair. Taking a cautious look around to make sure that no one was seriously hurt, he said, "This is Captain McCoy speaking. I want to talk to this crew about its flagrant habits of lying about while on duty, assuming positions unworthy of officers, and generally being slack on the job."

Laughter exploded on the bridge and the tensions of the past few minutes evaporated. Spock got to his feet quickly, a look of disapproval on his face. He helped Brenner up, noticing the commodore was still chuckling over McCoy's comment. As he reached down a hand to pull Kirk to his feet he saw that the hazel eyes had deepened to brown - a sure sign of irritation. He sighed quietly to himself - he knew he had not heard the last about directly disobeying the captain's orders.



The *Enterprise* was orbiting Starbase 4. Scotty was overseeing the transport of the *Oregon's* crew to the base hospital. Dr. McCoy had gone ahead with his reports. Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Commodore Brenner were waiting for the last of the evacuees to beam down.

"Well, Captain," said Brenner, "it was an eventful trip."

"We do our best, Commodore," smiled Kirk. "I hope you are now aware that the *Enterprise* is run by men and because of that, everything is not perfect a hundred percent of the time."

"I am well aware of that, Captain," said Brenner, stepping onto the transporter platform, "but remember that efficiency..."

He never got to finish his statement for at that point there was a loud sneeze and the Commodore vanished in the sparkling of the transporter. Scotty stared, transfixed, at the empty platform. Spock's expression did not change. Kirk looked from one to the other, then smiled and shrugged slightly.

"This seems to be where we stepped in. Come on, Spock, we still have a misunderstanding to clear up. Oh, Scotty..." taking a long look at his engineer "...please do something about that cold!"



DISCOVERY



"I hate debriefings!"

Spock's eyebrows rose slightly at his Captain's outburst, but as he had no feelings one way or the other on the subject he made no comment.

"It wouldn't be so bad if they didn't ask the same idiotic questions over and over again. You'd think they believed we were making the whole thing up!"

"It would be difficult to 'make up' Balok and the First Federation, Captain."

Kirk glanced at his First Officer, unable to tell if he was being serious or if dry Vulcan wit was taking over. Then he grinned, the memory of the diminutive commander who had caused some of the most tension-filled moments he had ever experienced filling his mind. "Yes, I could see where someone not in our position would have trouble believing us."

He looked around, suddenly realizing that they had free time on their hands. The *Enterprise* needed some attention to her engines, which had been damaged when they made their desperate attempt to pull away from the small ship that was towing them to a First Federation planet. They had been able to repair the warp drive to some extent, enough to get back to Starbase 12 for repairs, and to file reports on the first contact with a new race.

"I wonder how he's doing."

"He, Captain?"

"Bailey. I've never seen anyone look so comical or so shame-faced when he finally had a look at the 'unknown.'"

"Mr. Bailey is a most able officer. I am sure he will do honor to Starfleet."

"I wonder if McCoy would agree with you. He was against Bailey going."

Again Spock did not answer. He found he rarely agreed with McCoy, so unless Kirk asked him specifically for his opinion it prevented unnecessary arguments if he kept his thoughts to himself.

However, Kirk was intent on finding a place to eat and didn't seem to notice Spock's silence. As they walked along, Spock was aware of sideways glances at the odd pair. Rarely in Starfleet service did the various races mix, and it was most unusual to see a Vulcan and a Human together. Kirk was totally oblivious to the scrutiny. Spock envied him his security, his confidence in himself and his place in his chosen profession.

There were few places that Spock felt secure - the *Enterprise* was one of them, and it was becoming more so under Kirk's command. When he had served under Christopher Pike he was very much an outsider - efficient, loyal and alone.

He had rarely gone on shore leave during those years. He'd nowhere to go; he did not fit into any of the groups that were the nucleus of all shore parties. He had occasionally gone with Captain Pike, but even with him he had felt uncomfortable. Eventually he declined Pike's invitations, preferring to spend his free time alone in his quarters.

As they walked along Spock thought of the first time he had accompanied Kirk; it had happened long after Kirk took over command of the *Enterprise*. When Kirk had first arrived, he and Gary Mitchell had been practically inseparable. As Kirk grew into his command, his relationship with Mitchell had changed, although they had remained firm friends. After Gary's death, Spock had noticed that Kirk never again went on what he himself described as a "bender". In quiet moments he would often seek out his First Officer for a quiet talk or a game of chess. However, their shore leaves were never taken together. Although Kirk would occasionally ask, Spock remained in his preferred seclusion while his Captain found his own entertainment elsewhere.

Then Leonard McCoy was assigned to the *Enterprise*. He and Kirk had known each other for a number of years,

and Spock watched from a distance, a little jealous of the easy familiarity which passed between the two friends. From the time McCoy came aboard, he and Kirk spent their shore leaves together, the Captain no longer asking Spock if he wanted to come along. Spock had felt that familiar pang of loneliness even though he knew that if Kirk had asked him he probably would have declined. From what he had gleaned of his Captain's preferences on shore leave, he knew they could never share the same interests.

McCoy was away on a temporary teaching assignment the first time Spock went on shore leave with Kirk. They had just finished a very strenuous mission and everyone was tired and on edge. Kirk hadn't wanted to go by himself so he had invited Spock along. Again the Vulcan had almost declined, but then decided that Kirk needed the company, so he went along.

It had been a mistake from the start. Spock had grown up as the different one, and was accustomed to the abuse, both physical and verbal, that went with it. When he ran into bigotry it hurt, but he was able to shut off his emotions and could usually successfully ignore his attackers.

Kirk had never run into that sort of treatment. They had beamed down to Starney, an open port city. There were many Federation members of all races present, but they stayed mainly in their own groups in their own sections of the city. Before this when they had stayed for any length of time off the ship, Kirk and Spock had always been at a Starfleet Center. But Starney was a rustic place, and Kirk had decided he wanted to stay in the city. They got rooms at a local hotel, then went out to eat. They found a pleasant-looking restaurant and went in.

"We'd like a table near the stage," said Kirk, aiming his most charming smile at the hostess. Spock saw the woman glance at him.

"Captain, I think we'd better..."

Before he had a chance to say anything more, a large man came over, glancing at the table number the hostess had assigned.

"I'm afraid we only have one table left at the back," he said in a rather offhand way.

Kirk looked surprised. "Doesn't look all that crowded to me..."

"Nevertheless, sir, that's all we have available, unless your friend would like to go elsewhere."

Kirk stood stunned as the meaning of the man's words sank in. "You mean there isn't a table open to a Vulcan..." His voice had taken on a deathly quiet tone, as it always did when he was hanging onto his temper by a thin thread.

"Captain, please..."

Kirk looked into the anguished eyes of his friend, then turned back to the man. "We'll find another restaurant." He turned on his heel and left.

It had taken him a long time to cool down. He couldn't believe that such prejudice still existed. Spock had stayed silent until they returned to the hotel and the seclusion of their rooms, then Kirk had taken the bull by the horns.

"Spock, I can't believe you just accept treatment like that! I would have beaten that man to a pulp!"

"And what would that have accomplished, Jim?" Spock turned away and looked out the window. "You've never been different; you have never experienced all that goes with it..."

Spock was surprised at the depth of Kirk's distress at his words. He had not known that someone else could be so upset about something that he had to accept as a price of existence.

After that Spock suspected that Kirk had assigned himself as a buffer for his First Officer. He broke in more quickly to stop the needling between Spock and McCoy; he made an effort to see that Spock was with him at all Starfleet functions, no matter how important or trivial. And gradually that offer of protection had started to form a friendship, tenuous and not yet something that Spock could define; but it gave him a feeling of security he had never felt before.

"You all right, Mr. Spock?" Concerned hazel eyes were looking at him as Spock brought his mind back from the distance it had been.

"Yes, sir, I'm fine."

Kirk didn't look very reassured, but didn't pursue the subject. Spock followed him into the restaurant. The meal passed in silence, Kirk not breaking into his First Officer's thoughts. Spock evidently had something on his mind and Kirk would respect his privacy. He was beginning to understand that the Vulcan had moods similar to Humans. Kirk wondered if Spock was aware of how expressive he allowed himself to be - he had his face well schooled, but the eyes almost always betrayed him. At the moment Spock was brooding about something. If he wanted to talk about it, he would. Kirk had long since discovered that the most difficult thing in the universe was getting Spock to talk unless he wanted to.

Kirk stirred his coffee, his eyes roving over the other people in the restaurant. When he turned his attention back to his friend he found gentle brown eyes looking at him with amusement.

"She must be quite attractive."

Kirk flushed. It was only recently that Spock had started to return Kirk's gentle teasing. It amused Kirk to see his normally reticent First Officer let his own peculiar dry wit surface.

"As a matter of fact, she is." He took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. "Must have been brewing since yesterday. It's even stronger than that stuff on the *Enterprise*." He put in some cream, then leaned back. "We get our new navigator tomorrow. Hopefully we'll be ready to warp out by tomorrow night at the latest."

Spock nodded, fingering the tall, slender glass that held his eacho juice. "It will be good to be back on patrol..."

Kirk watched him as he stared into the depths of his glass. "You still don't like to come ashore, do you, Spock?" he said gently. The Vulcan's eyes did not move from the glass. Kirk felt a little lost. "It hasn't been so bad recently, has it? I mean, no one has been openly rude..."

He broke off as Spock looked up at him. Their eyes held for a long moment, then Spock looked down again. His silence told Kirk there was still much that he missed - things that were aimed like a barbed shaft at the Vulcan. He drew a silent breath, a little angry that he could do nothing to change other people's attitudes.



The information contained in the dossier was impressive; there was no doubt that the new navigator of the *Enterprise* was highly qualified. As the buzzer sounded at the door, Kirk closed the folder and put it on the shelf behind him.

"Come."

Kirk sat silently, looking at the man standing at formal attention in front of him. He had never really been a stickler for military procedure - he treated his crew with respect and received similar treatment, each crewmember realizing the worth of the other.

"Lieutenant Stiles reporting, Captain."

The voice was brisk, almost abrupt, and Kirk noticed that Stiles did not look at him but kept his eyes fixed on some point above Kirk's head. A small smile touched Kirk's lips as he fought back sudden amusement. He hadn't seen such a reaction to his authority since he had last had a cadet fresh from the Academy. That certainly didn't apply to Andrew Stiles. This man had seen plenty of duty time since his Academy days.

"At ease, Lieutenant; sit down."

They sat, silently appraising each other. Kirk's first impression of Stiles was negative and he didn't like it. He had learned to trust his instincts and was getting bad vibrations from the man sitting across the desk from him.

"Well, Lieutenant, welcome aboard the *Enterprise*."

"Thank you, sir; I'm pleased to be assigned here."

"Your qualifications as a navigator are impressive, Lieutenant..." Kirk's fingers drummed lightly on the top of the desk; then his clear, searching eyes held Stiles'. "You've stayed a navigator for an unusually long time - may I ask why?"

Stiles found he could not meet the piercing gaze of his new commanding officer. There were many reasons he had refused promotion, most of which he would rather keep to himself.

"I've served in many areas, Captain. I like navigation; I enjoy working on the bridge. A man can learn a great deal from his superior officers; I'm in no hurry to leave that post..."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully as Stiles spoke. His words were complimentary, but there was a note of insincerity about them. What was it about this man that bothered him?

"All right, Mr. Stiles, I think that's all for now. Drop by Sickbay and see Dr. McCoy. He'll be waiting for your physical."

"Yes, sir." Stiles stood up, then hesitated. "Captain, is Gary Mitchell still on board?"

A brief look of pain shone in Kirk's eyes, so brief as to go almost unnoticed. "Commander Mitchell died in the line of duty some months ago, Lieutenant. Why do you ask?"

Confusion showed strong on Stiles' face. "Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I knew Gary at the Academy. He was a senior when I first started. We became friends after I was assigned to plebe for him during initiation. He talked a lot about you, sir. I guess he sort of idolized you. He said he would end up serving with you, and I heard several years later that he was assigned to your ship. May I ask how he died?"

Kirk's eyes did not meet his. "A rockfall on Delta Vega..." He stood up abruptly. "I think you had better get to Sickbay. I'll see you on the bridge later."

"Yes, sir." Stiles was surprised at the pain on Kirk's face when he finally looked up. "I'll go to Sickbay right away."

McCoy's physical was quick and efficient. Stiles was beginning to like this assignment more than he thought he would. He had always been a stickler for efficiency, and everything he had seen on the *Enterprise* so far smacked of it.

"All right, Lieutenant, I think that's everything. You've got a couple of free hours to unpack and look around."

Stiles swung off the bed. He pulled on his shirt, then watched McCoy as he finished feeding the data into the computer.

"Doctor, may I ask you a question?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"A friend of mine, Gary Mitchell, used to be assigned here. Do you know how he died?"

Blue eyes clouded slightly as they looked at Stiles. "No, I don't know the details. He was killed before I was assigned to the *Enterprise*. Why?"

"Oh, no real reason. I was just wondering."

"The Captain could probably tell you..."

"No, it's not that important."

They were interrupted by Spock's arrival. Stiles froze momentarily as their gazes met. McCoy noted with interest the immediate dislike on Stiles' face, and knew from the blandness of Spock's that the Vulcan felt it acutely.

"Well, Spock," he said, trying to break the ice, "what can I do for you?"

"I should like to have a word with you privately, Doctor."

McCoy's eyebrows rose slightly but he made no comment on Spock's unusual request. "Come into my office."

"I'll take my leave, Dr. McCoy," said Stiles. He nodded formally to Spock and walked out. Spock's dark eyes followed him.

"You have a problem, Spock?"

"It is not I who have a problem, Doctor, it's the Captain. He has just asked me to take his shift."

McCoy frowned. It was very unusual for Kirk to transfer his duty time. "I think I'd better go see him."

Spock nodded. "I shall be on the bridge if you should need me."



Stiles came on duty along with Sulu, who introduced him to the rest of the bridge crew. He found he liked his co-workers; they were all friendly and obviously accepted him. He settled back at the navigation console and saugly congratulated himself on his new assignment.

"Sulu, what about the commanding officers?"

"Well, you've met Captain Kirk. There's not a better commander in the Fleet - the things he can teach you! I don't know if I'd like to have a different Captain ever. He's one in a million. Scotty is Chief Engineer; he's really level-headed, knows his stuff outside the engine room as well. Spock is..."

"Spock! You mean the Vulcan?"

Sulu looked a little surprised at Stiles' outburst. "Uh-huh, he's the First Officer and Science Officer. He's apt to stay apart from the crew during off-duty hours, but he's efficient and good in a crisis. Captain Kirk values his opinion..." His voice died away. Stiles didn't seem to be listening. He looked at him for a couple of seconds, then shrugged and turned his attention to the helm.

Stiles' stomach had twisted into a familiar knot. How often had he been forced from his position because of aliens? He thought he had finally made it to a ship where he would be free of alien tampering, alien presence. Now the second-in-command was a Vulcan. He would have to work closely with him. He knew he wouldn't be able to do it. He hadn't been able to do it before; he had always had to transfer to get away from a situation he could not tolerate. He squared his shoulders. He wouldn't let it happen again - if anyone left, it would be the Vulcan.



He didn't know how long he had been sitting there, staring at his hands, his thoughts far away at another time and place. The buzzer rang several times before he noticed. He took a moment to bury past memories, then hit the lock release. The door opened to reveal McCoy, just reaching out his hand to hit the buzzer again. A small smile touched his face as he watched McCoy walk in. It seemed that whenever he had a problem Bones would arrive on the scene.

McCoy put a bottle of Saurian brandy on the desk in front of Kirk, then rummaged around until he found a couple of glasses. He filled them both, then pushed one toward Kirk.

"Here, drink it." He looked at Kirk's slightly rebellious expression. "Medical order," he added quietly. Kirk picked up the brandy and swallowed it in one gulp, making a slight face as the liquor hit his empty stomach.

McCoy waited a moment, then reached out and refilled his glass. Kirk watched him, then glanced at the Doctor's still-full one.

"You not drinking?"

McCoy smiled. "Sure I'm drinking. You're going to be talking and I'm going to be listening. That means I'm going to be ahead of you in no time, so I'm giving you a chance to catch up before I get started." He settled back, picking up his glass. "All right, Jim, what's bothering you?"

"Who says something's bothering me?"

"I do." He took a swallow of brandy. "Come on, you'll feel better if you talk about it."

Kirk got up and started pacing. McCoy didn't shift from his comfortable slouch; he remained silent and kept his gaze on the restless figure in gold. Finally Kirk turned to look at him. "There's really nothing you can do, Bones. It's just something that happened that I find hard to live with..."

"Bary Mitchell's death?"

Kirk froze for a moment, then wearily nodded and sat down, picking up his glass. He took a swallow, then looked at McCoy, puzzled strong in his eyes. "How did you know?"

"I didn't; it was just a guess. Lieutenant Stiles asked me about him. I suggested he ask you. I gather he did."

"Yes, he did. Damn it, Bones, why can't I forget what happened, the horror of facing a friend you know you have to destroy? At times I wish I could be like Spock - you get hurt a lot less if you don't allow yourself to feel." He drained his glass, then looked at McCoy and smiled. "I don't know what it is about you, but whenever I need a shoulder to cry on, you're there. I'm beginning to think you're a mindreader or something."

McCoy's expression darkened a little. "I'm no mindreader, Jim, and I'm not the one who notices when you're down. Spock came to Sickbay because he was concerned about you, and this wasn't the first time. He's done it on a number of occasions..."

"Spock was worried about me?"

McCoy nodded. "He's never said so in words, but he seems able to read you like a book. I somehow doubt that a being with no emotions would be able to do that. It's kind of funny, though..."

"What's funny?"

"I often get the feeling when I'm around Spock that the entire crew could disappear tomorrow and he would accept it as a matter of fact, probably would only be concerned with the loss of valuable manpower. Occasionally I think he would be delighted if I was the first to go..." He looked at Kirk. "But not you, Jim. I've watched Spock when you're around; your presence brings something out in him, something that's missing at other times. I don't know exactly what it is - but he values you as more than just a commanding officer. I first noticed it when you were down on Tantalus V, when we couldn't contact you and Van Gelder was so desperate about your safety. Spock was frantic, and it wasn't just because his Captain was in danger; it was more than that."

"...the fear of being alone," said Kirk quietly, seeming to forget McCoy's presence. "How alike we are in that...it seems so unlikely that we..." He glanced up to see McCoy's eyes fixed on him. "I'm sorry, Bones, I'm babbling again." He put the empty glass on the desk and got up. "Thanks...for everything."

McCoy nodded. "Anytime, Captain."

The bridge was humming efficiently when he got there. By some instinct, Spock was getting out of the command chair as the turbolift doors opened. Kirk smiled at the unspoken respect for his authority. As he stepped down, he felt an unusual air of tension - something he had never experienced on the *Enterprise* except at times of crisis.

The Vulcan's report was concise and factual, bringing Kirk up to date with no unnecessary details. Kirk looked around the bridge; most of the crew had their eyes glued to their consoles. That amount of total concentration was also unusual.

He moved to the command chair which Spock had vacated just as a yeoman walked over with the fuel consumption report. As it passed from her hands to his, it fell to the floor. Flustered, she stooped to pick it up, only to promptly drop it again.

"It's all right," said Kirk in a quiet voice. "I'll get it."

He picked it up, glanced at the figures, then signed it and handed it back. He suppressed a grin as she dropped it yet again. "Yeoman, I think it would be a good idea if you had a short break."

The yeoman was almost as red as her uniform. "Yes, Captain, thank you, sir."

He checked the course with Stiles, who answered in crisp military terms. Kirk mentally shook his head. Stiles was going to have to learn to relax or he was going to stick out like a sore thumb.

Looking around, he saw Spock quickly look away. For the brief moment that their eyes met, Kirk could have sworn that there was something close to fear flickering in the usually tranquil brown eyes. But fear of what? He

decided he would find out after duty shift - if Spock would let him.

Sighing to himself, he walked over to Spock. "Do you have the reprogramming ready for the helm control?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

Kirk turned around. "Mr. Sulu, Lieutenant Stiles..." The two left their console to their backup and came over to where Kirk and Spock were standing. "Mr. Stiles," continued Kirk, "your predecessor, along with Mr. Spock and Mr. Sulu, had worked out new programming for the computer which will allow quicker computer analysis of any changes on your console. It will also automatically relay any transmission which might contact the navigation beam directly to the communications section. Mr. Stiles, you will be working closely with Mr. Spock." He clapped a hand on Stiles' shoulder. "You said you could learn a great deal from your superior officers - you'll never have a better or a more exacting teacher."

Walking back to the command chair, he missed the hostile look Stiles made no effort to disguise as he stared at Spock. For a few moments Spock returned the gaze, then dropped his eyes and turned to the computer.

"Gentlemen, if you will note..."

Spock's voice droned quietly on, the only sound in the comparative silence of the bridge. Kirk worked steadily on some reports he had hitherto tried to forget about. Finally he finished, and, glancing at the chronometer, discovered it was almost the end of the watch. Then he was caught by a low, angry voice. He looked over at the computer station to see Spock standing silently as Stiles raged in so quiet a tone that Kirk couldn't make out what he was saying. Sulu looked as though he wished he were anywhere but where he was.

"Trouble, gentlemen?"

All three of them jumped. Kirk's approach had been very quiet. Instantly Stiles fell silent. Sulu took a deep breath as if to say something, but decided against it. Spock avoided looking at Kirk.

"No, Captain, a minor disagreement as to procedure, nothing that can't be worked out."

"Good, perhaps it would be best if we all called it a day. The next shift is already here..."

Sulu and Stiles started to move away. "Mr. Stiles." Kirk's voice remained quiet, but the authority was underlined. "I would like you to report to my quarters after dinner."

Stiles looked at the unyielding hazel eyes, eyes unimpressed by the anger which still infused the navigator's face. For a brief moment he wondered what it was that Gary Mitchell had found so appealing.

"Yes, sir."

Kirk and Spock were the last ones to leave the bridge. The doors of the turbolift slid shut before either of them spoke.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?"

Spock looked at the lever in his hand as though he had never seen it before. Finally he looked at the wall ahead of him. "It was nothing important, Captain."

"Spock..."

"Captain, please."

Their eyes met, concern meeting - what? Kirk had never seen Spock look like that before.

"All right, Spock, if it's a problem, I'll leave it to you to figure out."

The turbolift stopped and they got out. The corridors were almost empty, most of the crew having already headed for dinner.

"Come to my quarters, Spock. I need to wash up." Spock's slight nod followed his statement. Kirk smiled to himself. More and more often he and Spock seemed to be able to communicate when neither of them actually said anything. It sometimes surprised him how often Spock knew what he was thinking, but when he had asked him about it, Spock's only comment was to say that Kirk's face was a mirror of his emotions. That had stopped Kirk cold - he had always thought he could not be read, that his command image would hold true. And he was right; Spock himself wasn't all that sure why he so often knew what was on Kirk's mind. He had never been close to anyone before, and he was uneasy with the direction things were taking with Kirk.

Kirk emerged from the bedroom, hair tousled as he pulled on a clean uniform shirt. He tugged it down and ran his hand over his hair, pushing it back into place. His candid eyes met Spock's.

"McCoy came to see me earlier."

There was no change of expression on Spock's face. "I trust you are not unwell, Captain."

"He said you suggested it."

Spock's eyes dropped.

"He also said it wasn't the first time."

Spock drew a deep breath. "Captain, I am a Vulcan. I do not understand the needs of a Human..." He looked up at Kirk. "However, I am not unobservant. There are times when I have seen you were troubled. As a Vulcan there

is nothing I can offer you, but Dr. McCoy is a Human, perhaps overly emotional, but one of your own race who can offer you something I am not capable of."

"What is a Vulcan capable of, Spock?"

Their eyes met, a glint of puzzlement showing in Kirk's and, for a brief moment, a flicker of vulnerability in Spock's. Then the Vulcan rose to his feet.

"Logic, Captain. It is what we have built our lives on. If we abandon logic, we abandon our heritage."

A momentary look of disappointment flashed across Kirk's face, to be replaced by the familiar gentle smile.

"Did I say something wrong, sir?"

"No, Spock, it's nothing. Let's go get something to eat before they lock us out."

They walked down the corridor in companionable silence, but the nagging phrase wouldn't leave Kirk's mind, the one he had hoped Spock would say - that he cared.



Stiles reported promptly after dinner. This time Kirk left him standing rigidly at attention, making no effort to ease the tension.

"I will warn you just once, Mr. Stiles. Lieutenant Commander Spock is your superior officer. He also happens to be, in my opinion and the opinion of those who have had a chance to serve with him, the best First Officer in the Fleet. He is also the most highly-qualified Science Officer serving in Starfleet. I don't know what's going on between the two of you, but I want it to stop right now. This ship runs on mutual respect and cooperation. If there are any differences, they are worked out in a reasonable fashion - there are no angry tirades on the bridge. I will not tolerate it. Morale is an important factor in the smooth operation of a starship. I will not allow you to destroy it."

Stiles shrank inwardly from the cold look on Kirk's face and the grim warning of his words. This was the commanding officer that few people ever saw, ever had any reason to see. Suddenly, even though he was under fire, Stiles began to understand what it was that so attracted Gary Mitchell to Kirk. Suddenly it became important to him to stay on the *Enterprise*. He looked at Kirk for the first time.

"I apologize, sir; it will not happen again."

Kirk's expression did not relent. His instinctive dislike of this man refused to go away. But he had given his warning; now it was up to Stiles.



Stiles appeared to heed the warning, and things seemed to improve. There was no repeat of the tension on the bridge. The only clue Kirk had that anything was wrong was Spock's continued silence, his refusal to talk about Stiles, and his unusual quietness in briefing sessions when Stiles was present. Kirk did not comment on it; he had asked once and Spock had not wanted to talk about it. Warning Stiles was the only help Kirk could give him.

Kirk was in an especially light-hearted mood one evening. They were due to establish orbit around Maynark IV sometime that night. Kirk had always been fond of the small, picturesque planet with its weird alien foliage and animal life. The planet was sparsely inhabited, and had a "hands-off," no-contact status. But it was rich in strobolin, the only drug which combatted choriocytosis in Vulcans. It was one of the few planets outside of the Beta Canopus region where it had been discovered. Since Maynark IV was located in the *Enterprise's* area of patrol, she was occasionally ordered to stop and gather a supply of the highly-perishable drug.

As always when Kirk played chess in this mood, Spock was struggling. In the many games he had played with Kirk he had discovered that the Human had no discernible pattern to his game - from what he had observed, Spock had decided that Kirk just shoved pieces around at random; yet he still won, which completely baffled the Vulcan. Tonight Kirk was being totally reckless. Spock played one of his most brilliant games and the result was a fierce battle. Kirk kept blocking Spock's carefully-drawn plan by one impossible move after another. His triumphant smile was met by Spock's manly acknowledgement of defeat.

"Sure you don't want me to teach you the 'Human' approach to chess, Mr. Spock?"

"I don't believe you have an approach, Captain."

Kirk chuckled, then noticed Stiles watching them. "Do you play chess, Mr. Stiles?"

The navigator came over eagerly. "Yes, Captain, I do enjoy the game."

"Good. I think Mr. Spock's ego needs a boost. I'll leave him to you." With a smile he got up and left, leaving Stiles and Spock standing awkwardly together. Spock knew Stiles had expected to play with Kirk.

"If you have other things to do, Lieutenant, we could postpone our match..." Kirk had left him to play with Stiles; he would not be the one to refuse to do so.

"I think that would be best, Mr. Spock." Stiles nodded and walked out, grateful that Spock had neatly sidestepped what could have only become another confrontation, yet damning Kirk for putting him in that situation.

Yeoman Rand was waiting for Kirk when he got to his quarters. He was surprised; she rarely saw him after duty hours.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Captain..." She hesitated, looking a little embarrassed.

"That's all right, Yeoman, what can I do for you?"

"It's about Robert Toolinson and Angela Martine."

For a moment Kirk looked puzzled, then his face cleared as he remembered who they were. "Have they decided to tie the knot?"

"Yes, sir. They would like to get married on Stardate 1789, if you would be available."

"Four days from now. Well, I don't see why not; it leaves them enough time if they want to back out. All right, Yeoman, tell them they have my blessings and to go ahead with their plans."

"Thank you, Captain."

Kirk smiled to himself as the door slid shut behind her. He was all sorts of things to his crew: leader, father, confessor, problem-solver. Quite a responsibility, but one he thoroughly enjoyed most of the time.

The next morning he beamed down with McCoy, Spock, Stiles and Uhura, along with two technicians who were assigned to help McCoy gather the strobolin. Stiles was assigned because Kirk wanted to evaluate the lieutenant's performance on landing party detail, and Uhura because Kirk knew how much she loved this particular planet for the same reasons he did.

Except for Kirk and Uhura, the landing party quickly fell to their work; the two of them went on a sightseeing tour, fascinated by the many alien formations that dotted the landscape.

"It's incredibly beautiful, Captain."

"It is, isn't it? All the crystalline rock formations, so many different colors. Look at those in the distance - quite a contrast to the green of the sky..."

Uhura nodded, fascinated by the spiral towers of rock reaching high into the sky. They walked along slowly, studying each new find with interest. Then, without thinking, Uhura reached out to touch a particularly beautiful ice-blue crystal set on the side of a smooth formation.

"Lieutenant, look out!"

Kirk moved with lightning speed. He had seen the crystal move slightly as Uhura's hand reached out, and realized it wasn't a rock crystal at all, but a sandbat, the most deadly form of life found on Maynark IV. The strength of his push threw Uhura on her face, but he was unable to protect himself - the sandbat attacked him. She watched in horror as Kirk stumbled backwards, trying to reach his phaser.

"Set Spock!"

She stumbled to her feet and fled back the way they had come. Diely she was aware of phaser fire - Kirk must have been successful in getting his phaser free.

Spock and Stiles were busy collecting the strobolin and didn't see Uhura until she was upon them.

"Spock, hurry...the Captain...sandbat..."

"Set McCoy, quickly."

Spock ran in the direction Uhura had pointed. Stiles hesitated for a moment, then ran after him. Uhura headed for the distant figure of McCoy.

Spock found Kirk staggering down the trail; twice he collapsed before Spock reached him.

"Jim!" He grabbed Kirk before he could fall again.

Kirk shook his head. "Can't see, can't think..."

Spock shook him hard. "Captain, look at me!" He felt Kirk start to go limp. He hit him hard across the face. "Jim, think about the pain!" There was no reaction. Spock hit him harder, a second time.

Suddenly he was grabbed from behind. Startled, he let go of Kirk, who fell to his knees. Stiles pulled Spock around and hit him with every ounce of strength he possessed. Spock was stunned, although he did not fall. Stridly, Stiles hit him again, ignoring a fiery pain in his hand.

"What the blazes are you doing?" McCoy's angry voice stopped Stiles from throwing the punch he knew would drop Spock in his tracks. He turned to see McCoy roughly hauling Kirk to his feet. "Stiles, take hold of him, hit him, shove him, keep him conscious any way you can!" He grabbed his communicator. "Damn it, man, do what you're told!" He flipped open his communicator as Stiles took hold of Kirk and lightly slapped him. He was abruptly shoved aside by Spock, who had regained control and started slapping and shaking Kirk.

"McCoy to Enterprise - landing party to beam up, medical emergency. Have M'Benga get the antidote for sandbat poison."

Within seconds they were in the transporter room. M'Benga appeared almost immediately, and the antidote was administered; gradually the serum spread through Kirk's system. Finally McCoy was satisfied, and Spock gently laid

Kirk's unconscious body on the waiting stretcher.

"He'll be all right now," said McCoy, his hand still on Kirk's pulse. "I'll keep him in Sickbay until tomorrow, just to be on the safe side."

Spock nodded. "In that case, I suggest we return to duty." He left with a badly-shaken Uhura, but McCoy knew Spock would attempt to convince her that she was not responsible for the sandbat's attack.

"Lieutenant Stiles."

The man stopped at the door and turned to face McCoy.

"Your behavior down there demands an explanation. You interfered badly, and you might have caused the Captain to lose his life. The venom of the Maynark sandbat strikes the nervous system - only by keeping the patient conscious and seeing do you have any hope of being able to treat him. Spock was behaving as the situation called for. What were you attempting to do down there?"

Stiles flushed. "I thought he was attacking the Captain," he muttered. "Attacking the...! Lieutenant, I would suggest you observe the relationship between the officers on this ship, and then ponder the absurdity of the statement you have just made. Attack the Captain, indeed!" He snorted as he started to push the stretcher, M'Benga quickly falling in by his side to help. They left Stiles fuming angry and embarrassed, standing by himself in the transporter room and hating Spock even more for the trouble he found himself in.



A grumbling McCoy released an equally rebellious Kirk the next morning. He met Uhura as he made his way back to his quarters. He knew she was waiting for him. They talked for a short time; then she returned to the bridge and he continued on his way. Before he reached his quarters he ran into Spock.

"The corridors seem crowded this morning," he teased, causing Spock's eyebrow to rise indignantly.

"I assure you, Captain, I was not lying in wait. There is a priority message coming in for you - urgent and scrambled."

Kirk sobered immediately. "Let's go find out what they want."

The message was completed, the new orders received. Kirk and Spock sat in silence, the enormity of the message gradually sinking in. Kirk reached for the intercom and gave Stiles the course change, then leaned back and looked at Spock.

"Not very encouraging, is it?"

Spock shook his head. "A very dangerous situation, Captain. Every decision you make could have a lasting impact on Federation security."

"You mean I could be the trigger that starts the war..."

Spock's silence held his answer, and his eyes said he would follow Kirk in any decision he made. Kirk smiled at the unspoken show of support.

"Well, it'll take three days to get there. Orders say to keep this to ourselves until we actually run into the Romulans." He got up, Spock rising with him. Kirk looked at him. "This is getting a little repetitious, Spock, but McCoy told me what you did back on Maynark IV - thanks."

"None necessary, Captain. I happened to be the first to get to you."

"He also told me about Stiles' actions."

Spock's gaze dropped. "He did not understand what I was doing," he said lamely.

"Are you sure, Spock?"

Spock turned away. "We should be getting to the bridge." Kirk knew he had been warned away yet again. He sighed, knowing Spock would not face what appeared to be a real problem. Stiles was going to have to watch his step; one more slip and he was going on report.



The next few days passed quietly. There was much speculation on why the *Enterprise* was warping so quickly toward the neutral zone, but Kirk did not explain in much detail, only that there had been a change of orders which was taking them there.

McCoy met Kirk at breakfast, a wide grin splitting his face. "Well, Jim, I finally get to be the father of the bride." Seeing Kirk's raised eyebrows, he chuckled. "Surely you haven't forgotten there's a wedding today!"

Kirk shook his head ruefully. "How could I? Yeoman Rand has been my shadow for the past four days, reminding me about it." He ate a little of his meal, then shoved the tray away. McCoy looked at him with concern.

"You still don't feel very well, do you?"

"A little nauseated at times; it's gradually wearing off. Besides, can't have the marrying judge sick on the wedding day, can we? I'll see you later." He picked up his tray and left. McCoy watched him, worry nagging at the back of his mind. Something was hanging heavily on Kirk's mind, and it wasn't only the after-effects of the

sandbat's attack.

Spock met Kirk on the bridge. "Something's happening at the outposts, Captain. We are still too far away to make proper contact, but long range sensor sweeps are showing an unusual amount of high radiation."

"Doesn't sound very good. Keep monitoring; let me know as soon as you discover anything."

"Captain?" Yeoman Rand was standing nervously at his side.

"Yes, I know, the wedding. Spock, I'll be in the chapel."

"Acknowledged."

He wasn't there very long. Red alert rang out before he had a chance to get very far with the ceremony. The tension was running high when he got back to the bridge and informed the crew of their orders and possible fate. They watched in horror as Outpost 4 was destroyed before their eyes. Kirk knew every decision from here on in was critical, and all hands would need to be working at peak efficiency. Spock tracked the alien ship, and he gave the order to shadow, only to run into resistance from Stiles. Kirk's look of cold anger served to stop the argument before it started, but before he had a chance to turn around Stiles was again causing problems. The trouble between him and Spock was deeper than Kirk had thought. Uhura had intercepted a transmission from the alien ship and had transmitted it to cryptography. Stiles muttered something that Kirk couldn't believe he had heard.

"I didn't quite get that, Mr. Stiles."

The navigator looked a little flustered. "Nothing, sir."

Kirk felt his anger rise. "Repeat it." His voice was very slow and quiet.

Stiles' anger was also on the rise. "I was suggesting that Mr. Spock could probably translate it for you, sir."

"I assume you're complimenting Mr. Spock on his ability to decode." Kirk knew that that had nothing to do with Stiles' statement. Suddenly he understood with utmost clarity what was causing the trouble between his navigator and First Officer.

"I'm not sure, sir."

Kirk lost his temper. He swung Stiles' chair around to face him. "Well, here's one thing you can be sure of, Mister! Leave any bigotry in your quarters, there's no room for it on the bridge. Do I make myself clear?"

The icy look in Kirk's eyes tore through to Stiles' soul. He had been warned; he would not be warned again.

"You do, sir."

Everyone's attention was totally fixed on his panel. It was very rare that Kirk reprimanded a crewmember in front of his peers - if it was done it was done in private, and never went any further. And they knew he was furious. Whenever his voice remained controlled and quiet was the time his anger was most dangerous - everyone but Stiles knew it, and he was learning fast.

And for the first time Kirk had expressed verbally in front of his crew his growing respect and friendship for his First Officer. They had watched it develop; now it was confirmed. As Kirk turned away from Stiles in anger and disgust, his eyes met Spock's. The wounded look was there as he knew it would be, but there was something else, too. The anger died from Kirk's eyes and a small smile took its place. Spock turned back to his scanners. There was nothing he could say; no one had ever cared before, cared enough to defend him, cared enough to reach out his hand in an offer of friendship.

The next few hours were tension-filled and draining. The Romulans had broken the treaty; war was the next logical step; only the *Enterprise* stood between the Romulans and destruction; only Kirk could decide if they would live or die. Throughout that time there was also the problem of Stiles' continued rebellion. He was no longer disguising his hatred for Spock. He had obviously decided he had nothing left to lose - on the bridge, in the briefing room, he attacked verbally everything that Spock did. Kirk protected Spock as best he could with all his other worries.

As usual, McCoy came when he was needed most. He came to lend a shoulder, to listen to a cry for help, help which no one could give but which somehow he did. Exhausted, Kirk returned to the bridge, still not knowing what he was going to do, still uncertain as to which step was right. However, a slip from Spock decided it for him; almost immediately Stiles was there with his hate. Then the Romulans attacked, taking everyone's attention away from the pettiness of life. Kirk was able to send Stiles to man the phasers, one less problem for the moment.

He sent Spock to check on battle readiness. He knew the fight was not over; only death would end this battle. The Romulan ship became visible; their bait had been accepted; now they must kill. For an eternity the phasers remained silent - then they fired, and it was over. The commander that Kirk had come to respect was defeated. The weight of command and responsibility came to the crushing point as Kirk watched the death of the Romulan ship and her crew.

Repair crews were already busy as he headed for Sickbay. He felt a surge of relief when he saw Spock standing beside McCoy, uninjured. Stiles' report surprised him; after the hell he had put Spock through, the Vulcan had

rescued Stiles with no thought to the risk of his own life. But that was the logical Vulcan. He would shut off his emotions; he would not consider revenge.

He barely listened to McCoy until certain words registered. "Tomlinson...fiance is in the chapel..." Captain's duty - he could marry them and he had to bury them and somehow make the ones who lived understand why some had to die. Being right didn't make things any easier.

Yeoman Rand's message was bittersweet thanks for a battle already fought. Angela Martine showed him why he had the best crew in Starfleet. She had lost what some people never found, yet she held her grief privately in her own heart. There was little he could offer, but he knew that she understood why it had happened.

He went back to his quarters, keeping exhaustion one step behind him. There was one more thing he had to do. He called Sickbay.

"Bonas, is Stiles up to a brief meeting?"

"Yes, Captain. He should be in his quarters. I released him just after you left. He didn't suffer any ill effects from the exposure to the gas."

"Thank you, Doctor. Kirk out."

McCoy sat looking at the intercom. Something was going on, and he was fairly sure it had to do with Stiles and Spock. He had seen trouble the first day Stiles had come aboard, that first time in Sickbay when he had turned and seen Spock. The look on his face had told McCoy more than words would ever need to.

"This is Captain Kirk. Lieutenant Stiles, report to my quarters immediately."

He was sitting at his desk when the buzzer rang. When Stiles walked in he didn't look at Kirk.

"Sit down, Lieutenant."

Stiles sat and looked at his hands. Kirk did nothing to relieve his embarrassment.

"Lieutenant, I'm relieving you of duty and putting your actions on report. You were insubordinate, you insulted a senior officer, disobeyed orders, and disrupted the smooth operation of the bridge crew during a red alert. I am doing nothing to soften these charges. I highly doubt if this is the first occurrence; am I correct?"

Stiles nodded, still looking at his hands.

"Mr. Spock reported none of your behavior nor did Dr. McCoy..." Stiles looked up in surprise. Kirk smiled grimly. "You dug your own grave, Lieutenant; the blame is none but your own. You'll have to accept the consequences of your own actions."

They sat facing each other, the truth of Kirk's statement ringing loud in the silence. Finally Kirk spoke again.

"You may go now. That's all I have to say."

Stiles nodded again, then rose and started for the door. There was no pity on Kirk's face as he watched him go; this was not a cadet making a first mistake and they both knew what the consequences of Kirk's report would mean to Stiles' career.

As he reached the door, Stiles stopped and turned, forcing himself to face the cold hazel eyes of his commanding officer. "Captain..." He faltered for a moment. "I am not saying this in the hopes that you will relent on your position. Spock saved my life today; he could easily have let me die; in fact, he risked his own life. He had no reason to save me; I would have done nothing to save him if the positions had been reversed..." He swallowed hard, then continued. "I respected Gary Mitchell - he worshipped you. Mr. Spock told me how he really died. He told me of the agony you went through because of it. You and Mr. Spock have shown me how you appreciate each life as terribly important; I know that I'm not able to put everyone else ahead of me, and that's something that is demanded on this ship..." Turning quickly, he left.

Kirk sat looking at the closed door. A proud, angry man had been humbled, perhaps broken, and he felt nothing but emptiness. He could not dredge up any sympathy. The buzzer rang again.

Probably McCoy, thought Kirk as he hit the automatic lock. It's about the right time for him to arrive on the scene and lend me his shoulder. But it was Spock, not McCoy, who walked in. Kirk's eyebrows rose a little.

"I trust I am not interrupting something, Captain."

"No, I'm just sitting here disliking myself slightly."

"I have just been speaking with Lieutenant Stiles. He apologized for his earlier actions."

"Um."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Kirk looked at Spock.

"Remember a few months ago, when I wanted to beat that headwaiter to a pulp?"

Spock nodded.

"You asked then what it would have accomplished. I've just done that, Spock, and you were right. It probably won't have any lasting effect."

"You did what was necessary, Jim, what regulations required."

"Regulations. They don't take very much into account. They don't see the shades of gray which make up the black and white they are regulating."

Spock looked at him, trying to judge just how upset Kirk was with what had happened. "Jim, you've just gone through a real ordeal, you've averted an intergalactic war..."

"And saw a valuable commander die."

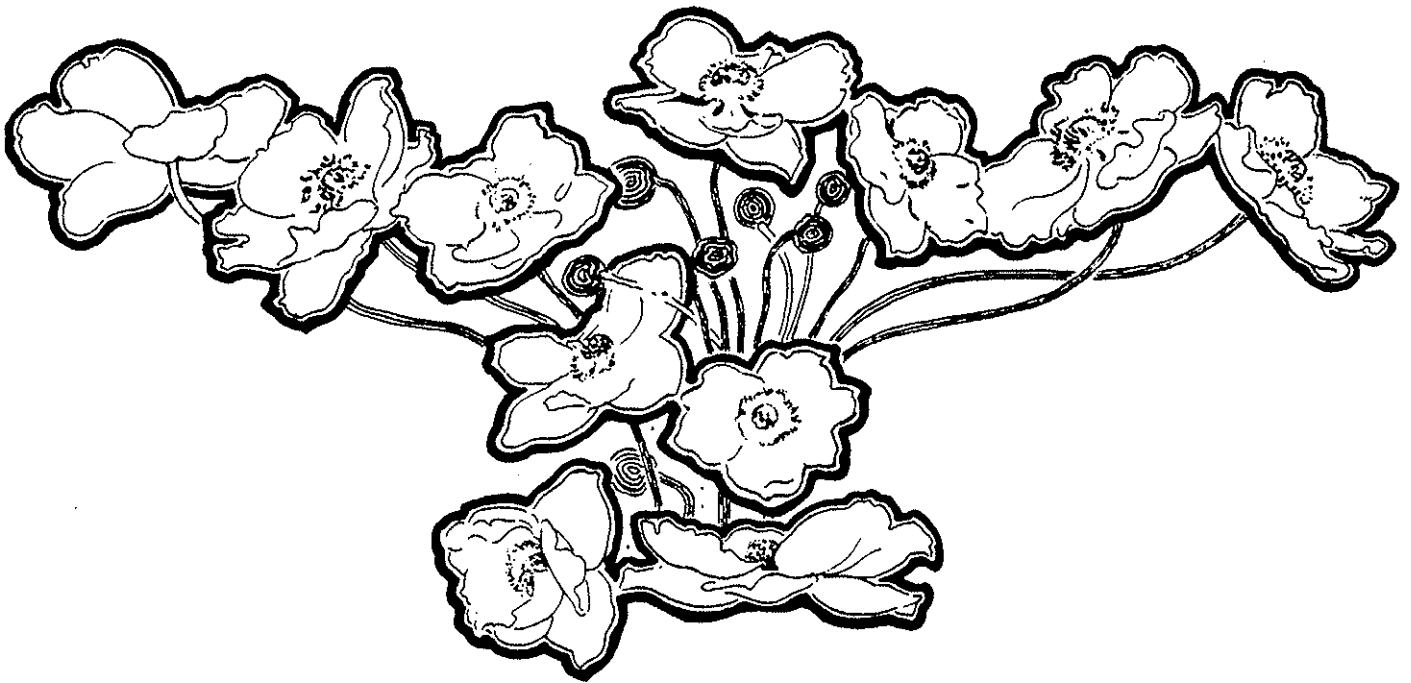
Spock nodded. "And saw senseless death, death which has now ended any hope of furthering that tenuous contact with an alien race. You feel you have broken Lieutenant Stiles; perhaps you have, but it was not your design which brought his downfall. Perhaps he will someday believe what he told you..." He paused as Kirk looked up in surprise. "He told me what he had said to you, after he apologised."

"So, one man might someday be better because of all of this, is that what you're saying?" The bitterness was still there, masked by the exhaustion.

"No, no, that's not all. Do you know what you did on the bridge earlier today?"

"I dressed a man down in front of the crew..."

"No; you looked at me and your eyes said you cared. Now I ask you to think back, Jim. You once asked me what a Vulcan was capable of, and I said logic. I was afraid of the answer you were really looking for. Captain, I'll give you that answer now..."





He stood with the group of newly commissioned officers, one of an elite group, tops in their chosen field. There was an exceptional class, all chosen for outstanding ability and leadership.

They looked impressive in their uniforms, the black shirts covered by the muted silver of the coveralls, the proud uniform of the Klingon Empire forces.

Kor stood silently at the end of the line. He had an easy confidence which stood alone even in this company. He had proven himself time and again to have outstanding ability. No task was too difficult for him. Even his instructors held him in healthy respect.

This would be the last day these men would be together. They were too valuable to be kept as a unit. Their training was to be used throughout the Fleet. Those who survived would slowly rise up the ladder to command. They would be assigned to ships throughout the Fleet. They would be resented by their superior officers, scorned by their inferiors. They would be assigned to the dirtiest, deadliest assignments. Not many of them would survive, but those who did would be tomorrow's leaders.



As the years passed Kor was gradually promoted. He was an able leader and had an intelligence which was rare among Klingons. He used his intelligence in the same way others would use force and fear to gain an end. Kor played cat and mouse with his intended victims, analyzing, studying reactions before he set the ultimate trap. He was a proud man, contemptuous indeed of inferiors but when he met an equal, which was rare, he treated that man as an equal, even knowing he must ultimately destroy him. The bigger the challenge, the better Kor liked it.

The Klingon Empire was growing ever larger. Their small area of space was becoming overpopulated, expansion became a necessity. The battle cruisers started out, exploring new regions, conquering small planets bordering their space - space which was claimed by the United Federation of Planets.

Not much was known of the Federation. Reports held they were a peaceful organization not readily pushed into a fight. There were also reports of a Starfleet. As yet they had few warships but spies reported that new battle cruisers were being put into service, starships they were called, every bit as powerful and dangerous as the Klingon cruisers. As yet they had not met each other in battle. There were some reports that they had destroyed Romulan battleships but up to now it was rumour, not fact.

Kor was aboard the first Klingon ship which met a starship. He was fascinated by the Federation vessel. Her design was very practical, much more so than the ship he was on. She glided in silent swiftness through the blackness of space. He punched the viewscreen, bringing her in closer. The name stood out clearly: *USS Enterprise*.

The voice of her Captain filtered down through the open intercom. The English was translated by the mechanical interpreter. Kor, however, unlike most Klingons at that time, spoke English well. His class had been taught that they would eventually rule the Federation, and English was vital to that end.

The voice was steady as he introduced himself: Captain Christopher Pike. The viewscreen dissolved to show a dark, slender man, his cold blue eyes holding the screen as he talked to his counterpart on the bridge of Kor's ship. An air of quiet confidence surrounded the man. A woman sat to his left. Kor studied her with interest. Women were not allowed on the fighting ships of the Empire. It would certainly be nicer for all concerned to have them around. They would prove useful at times, although not necessarily for fighting.

Another figure moved into view. Kor stared at the sculptured hair, upswept brows and pointed ears. He had never seen a Vulcan before although he was familiar with the race. He was surprised to see one on a starship. He had heard that Vulcans were men of peace, that their philosophy prevented them from fighting. He smiled inwardly.

With men like that there was no way the Federation could fight off a determined attack of the Klingon fleet.

The two giant ships sat still in space. A challenge had been given - neither commander was prepared to back down. It was only a matter of time before one of them fired.

Kor was content to wait. Playing on another's nerves was a game he found to be most successful. They had time - he had patience. However, he was not in command, only a subordinate. The orders came to fire. Kor refused. He knew it was the wrong action; they were not certain of the military might of this starship. Intuition told him it would be better to wait out the challenge, the bluff. He was sure the Federation ship would not start an attack unprovoked.

It was one of the few times in his life he made a mistake. He underestimated the hate of his immediate superior and was felled by a tremendous blow. Kleen was still smarting from several reprimands given him because of reports from Kor. Now his direct orders were disobeyed. He would take no more from this supercilious upstart.

By the time Kor regained consciousness the battle was over and the Klingon ship had managed to limp back into its own space, badly damaged. The Federation starship had not attempted to follow, had only tracked them long enough to make sure the Klingons were indeed heading home, then turned and were soon out of sensor range.

Kor listened with interest to the reports of the battle. The ship was obviously as powerful as reports had stated and the man who led her a superior officer. The *Enterprise* apparently had been able to almost completely disable the Klingon ship with minimal damage to herself. The ability intrigued Kor. This was a worthy challenge.

However, the challenge was not to be his. His disobedience was reported by Kleen and he was transferred. The one underlined, unstated fact of the Empire forces was that every order was to be obeyed with no question put forward. Kor had disobeyed. He was given ground duty, the worst possible assignment for a man who longed to be a conqueror in space.

He was part of an occupation force on the planet of Deneb 12. The planet was a necessary thorn in the side because of its position just on the edge of the Klingon Empire, but its people had no wish to be under the Klingon command. The Denebians were organized into a large underground. Hundreds were killed by the occupation forces and yet supplies were still destroyed and harassment and opposition were put up at every turn.

The leader of these people was an enigma. The Klingons knew him as Syn. He was young, brilliant and dedicated. He was an elusive figure, his followers were fanatically devoted to him. He was everywhere, in the thick of the attacks, yet no Klingon had even been close to catching him. None of his followers would reveal where he hid, if indeed they knew. Kor doubted if they did. He had seen the torture of some of Syn's followers. If they had not broken they were made of stronger fibre than he was aware existed.

After he had been on Deneb 12 for several months, Kor was called before the military governor. There were few men that Kor respected and Kalith was not one of them. He was adequate in his own way but his value was not as a commander of an occupation force. He was a man of space and out of his element here. Syn was making him out to be a fool. Kalith was slowly being pushed to a desperate edge as everything he tried failed to bring him any closer to catching the elusive Denebian.

His orders were precise. Capture Syn and be promoted; fail and die. They stood facing each other man to man, two men who understood each other perfectly, who knew that what had been stated was done so as fact, not threat.

For the next weeks Kor dogged Syn at every step. He knew him like his own brother, probably better. He had studied the data they had on the man, trying to figure out what made him tick. He had stared at his picture until the image of Syn was indelibly stamped on his brain.

Even a mere image of the man showed him to be one of those rare people who commanded attention. He appeared to be of medium height and possessed an athlete's figure. Broad shoulders and a muscled upper body tapered to a slender waist and slim hips. The arms suggested strength without losing the tapered lines of the rest of his body.

When Kor looked at that figure it was not the body but the face which held his eyes. Syn appeared absurdly young, yet there was some indefinable look in the wide set eyes which instantly let one know that this man had experience far beyond his years. Sandy hair was worn medium length with a wayward lock tumbling down over the forehead, making him look even younger. The mouth had the classic lines approved by the ancient warriors.

"Classic beauty," thought Kor, staring at the silent picture, "and a dangerous man..." he sighed to himself. He was beginning to like Syn and would regret to be the instrument of his death. But die he must. Kor had his orders, he would not disobey again.

The natives worshiped Syn. With him in custody, under slow torture, they would soon toe the line in order to keep their leader alive. A man could be tortured for a long time before life left him. Kor did not like the barbaric use of torture but realized that everyone knew what it stood for and it always proved to be a useful deterrent.

As the weeks passed Syn's strikes grew bolder. Kor was content to watch and wait, trying to establish a

pattern. The trap must be perfect or else the elusive Denebian would escape. This was the ultimate challenge.

Kor spent those weeks carefully laying out his plans. Even the smallest detail was worked out. Nothing could go wrong. There was no way Syn could escape Kor's carefully spun web.

Syn could not avoid it, but the Federation could destroy it. Intelligence reports showed that starships were on their way. Kalith was preparing to meet them. This was something concrete, something he could deal with. However, Kor's orders stood. The Federation may attack but Syn was to die before help arrived.

Kor spread his men around the munitions dump. He knew they would all die but felt nothing for them. Unknown to them, explosives ringed the perimeter of the dump, the perimeter they had been sent to guard. As the Denebians died, so would they.

As they waited in the darkness they heard fighting start in the distance. The Federation troops had landed. Kor blocked it out. His duty was here, he would worry about the others later.

Everything went according to plan. The area was soon ringed by Denebians. They knew the Klingons had stored most of their heavy explosives here. Kor had made sure that they knew. Explode their stockpile and the Klingons would lose ninety per cent of their ammunition. The necessity of destroying the arms was such that Kor knew that Syn would be leading the attack.

Silent figures flitted through the blackness. Kor's eyes were riveted on what appeared to be the leader as he silently signalled his followers. Suddenly they froze. Kor held his breath. He had heard of the sixth sense that was attributed to the slender, fair-haired man standing so close to where Kor was lying. The figure stooped and picked something up. There was a dull thump followed by a cry of pain. Suddenly the sky lit up with a series of explosions, the lights of the detonations flashing in a circular pattern. The Denebians hit the ground - all except Syn. He leapt over the heaving ground and sped to the stockpile.

Kor was two steps behind. He had his phaser aimed, ready to use.

"Stop!"

The figure in front of him froze.

"Tell your men to get out of here..."

Silence.

"Now!"

The man turned and Kor got his first good look at the man who had filled his waking and sleeping hours for the past weeks.

Green eyes met his unflinchingly, a small smile touched the sculpted lips. He was dressed entirely in black. Kor found himself being strangely drawn by something he couldn't define. He had rarely met anyone even near his equal, but one look at Syn told him that finally he had.

A hint of anger touched the wide set eyes but the man stood in a relaxed manner, not appearing at all disturbed with the present circumstances. When he spoke Kor discovered the voice suited the man.

"You care little for life, Lieutenant - those were your men who just died."

Kor shrugged. "They were expendable, unimportant..."

He saw the anger deepen and smiled. "Your men, Syn, they haven't gone yet. Would you like me to send them the way of my command? I can, you know. You can save them with a word. Look around you."

Syn looked and saw another ring of Klingons behind his men. His eyes acknowledged Kor's lifted eyebrows.

He shouted something which Kor couldn't understand. Syn's men looked uncertainly at each other. He shouted again and they turned and left. Syn turned back to Kor. His eyes slowly lost their anger to become watchful.

Two powerful men stood facing each other, neither moving. Suddenly Kor didn't want this man to die in front of the others. He owed him that much. He yelled an order and his men melted into the darkness. Syn's expression didn't change.

"Death is sometimes necessary in order to achieve an end, but the death of one such as you should be administered by one alone, not by a mob..."

Syn bowed with a mocking smile. "You are not worried about staying behind and running into Federation forces?"

Kor returned the smile. "The Federation will not find us. You will be dead and my ship will be gone. Come." He motioned with his phaser and Syn turned and started walking.

Syn sensed the approaching rocket. He spun around and grabbed Kor before the Klingon had a chance to react. They both fell headlong into the underbrush, Syn half lying on the winded Kor. The rockets fell all around them. Finally one hit dead center of the munitions dump. The resulting blasts rained debris all around them.

The barrage seemed to go on forever. Kor cried out as fragments of a fusion grenade buried themselves in his leg. He felt Syn jerk as the Denebian was hit with flying debris. Then everything went black.

He woke to the feeling of something cold moving over his face. He opened his eyes to find deep burning eyes

looking at him. Syn sat back, the wet rag - a torn piece of his tunic - still in his hand. Kor looked about dizzily. He had been moved to a nearby stream. He saw that his leg had been wrapped, the wounds staunches with more strips from Syn's tunic.

He looked up at the Denebian. There was a jagged cut on his forehead, a bright red gash in the pale face.

"Why?"

Syn didn't seem surprised by the question. "We do not kill without good reason."

Kor nodded. "A weakness."

The Denebian smiled. "Some would think it." He looked into the distance. "The fighting is dying. I will leave you here; there is water and you are close to the main road. If your side is victorious they will find you soon enough. If the Federation has won you still have your communicator and can beam back to your ship..." He stood up and Kor was again aware of the perfect proportions of the man. The clear eyes held his, not a hint of fear in them, one equal looking at another. "We do not kill easily, Lieutenant, but we can kill. I would suggest that you do not return to Deneb 12. My followers might not be so obedient next time."

Then he was gone.

The Klingons were not victorious in that battle. The Federation once again had Deneb 12 under their protection.

Kor beamed up to his ship, and he lived. Kalith was killed when the flagship was disabled. No one else knew that Kor had been under a death sentence. Also, he argued with himself, Syn could be dead. The fighting was fierce. It was possible.

The fight for Deneb 12 was the first of many that Kor was involved in. The Empire was determined to expand and conquest was the only way. Kor didn't question it, didn't question the death and destruction it caused - the waste of thousands of lives. Conquest was the accepted way, the Klingon way, and he was first and foremost an officer of the Klingon Empire.



The years passed and Kor survived. His survival assured his continued promotion. He was feared by almost all who knew him. Unlike his contemporaries, his was a cold, calculated cunning. There were few displays of temper, just a steely intelligence which weighed all alternatives before attacking. Most under his command couldn't understand him but he made no attempt to change. He found the fear others had for him helped him to rule over them far more easily than could be done otherwise.

Kor carefully studied any confrontation the Empire had with the Federation. He knew that one day the Empire would make its move against the Federation. More and more often the Starfleet defenses were tested, the effectiveness of the starships evaluated. When the attack came there would be no luck involved. The Empire would know every odd and which way it would go.

The Starfleet was strong. The men of Starfleet fought superbly but they had to be provoked. Hostilities were always started by the Klingons.

One ship stood out far above the others. The Klingons avoided her when they could. A confrontation with her only brought destruction. Kor had met up with her only once those many years ago - the USS Enterprise. Christopher Pike was no longer her commanding officer, he had been replaced by a Captain James T. Kirk. Not much was known of him but from a few brief encounters he was held in healthy respect by all Empire Commanders. He only fought as a last resort but he was a brilliant tactical commander. Even when vastly outnumbered he was impossible to trap. Kor looked forward to the eventual, inevitable meeting with anticipation. Not since the days when he had hunted the Denebian, Syn, had he so looked forward to meeting another in battle.



Finally the long months of planning ended. Warnings had been sent to the Federation and were ignored. The small convoys sent out to test the Federation's strength and willingness to fight had served their purpose. The response brought nothing but vague threats - no military backup followed their warnings. A great deal of time and effort had gone into this invasion plan. Flagships and battle cruisers were set and in position.

All the Klingon commanders had been summoned, duties handed out, orders given. Kor stood alone after the others had long gone, a bitter taste of defeat in his mouth. Occupation duty - shades of Kalith. He had been given duty that a raw recruit was capable of handling. He fingered the gold sash of commendation, touched the medals on his left shoulder. How many others had won such honours? They could be counted on the fingers of one hand - a mere handful of commanders in the Klingon forces had been awarded the sash - only a handful! And he had been relegated to the leader of an occupation force. He would not be in the front lines which would destroy the best ships that Starfleet could summon. He would miss all the glory of the kill.

Kleen, his old nemesis from so long ago entered the room, surprise showing on his face. "Still here, Commander? I thought you had received your orders."

Kor glared at him but the other Klingon met his eyes squarely, speculatively. The hostility in Kor's eyes did not bother him. He didn't care if Kor was upset at his orders. Secretly he was pleased. Kor had superior ambition. That ambition had led him quickly up the ladder of command and success; he was as ruthless and unprincipled a man as Kleen had ever met. This was probably the first time since he had risen to the rank of commander that Kor had received an assignment he detested. Kleen hoped Kor would bungle it - he deserved to be brought down a peg.

Kor's black eyes never left Kleen's face. His voice was low when he answered, the anger held tight, but awesome in its controlled power.

"Yes, Commander, I have received my orders. However, I noted that you received none." He smiled as he watched Kleen's colour deepen as his anger started to match Kor's. Satisfied, he nodded slightly and left.

The officers of his occupation force were gathered aboard Kor's flagship when he beamed aboard. They all had been hand-picked several years earlier and trained under his command. They were top men, cruel, ruthless, and blindly obedient. Kor looked bitterly at them. They were trained for combat, conquest, not for the lily-livered job of occupation. However, they had their assignment and they would obey. If the people under their occupation were treated with undue harshness, that was their hard luck. Kor knew it would happen. All his men were angered by their assignment and they would vent their anger on the nearest victim.

Kor flipped a switch and an ordinary planet filled the screen, floating in silent beauty against the blackness of space. No one noticed the beauty.

"That," said Kor, spitting out the words, "is Organia, populated by a people not even worth conquering. That is what we are going to take. The planet is strategically important, the only one in this sector which can be used as a supply base. The people have no defenses. I am sure that after we kill a thousand or so we shall have no trouble."

There was no flicker of interest - the death of a thousand meant nothing to his officers. Death was a way of life - people could be controlled only through fear, a reign of terror.

"We know there will be Federation ships close by," continued Kor, "reports say that the Starfleet ships have not grouped. They are unprepared for war." Kor's smile widened. "They are fools, these Starfleet commanders. They love peace, not war. We will crush them. If we meet a starship we attack! A single starship is no match for a fleet of our Empire battlecruisers. We'll cut them down like flies!"



The Klingons were ruthless and efficient. As soon as they entered orbit around Organia the main occupation force beamed down. Within minutes all major facilities were taken, a large citadel was instantly converted into occupation headquarters. By the time Kor beamed down, his officers had found out where the ruling council met. Taking his hand-picked guard he went there immediately.

As he walked through the streets he was sickened by what he saw. The few inhabitants who took any notice of them at all smiled benignly as they passed. They showed no fear of the Klingons. It was as though they had warlike strangers coming into their midst as a daily happening. Kor kicked out at some sheep that were passing, his fury at being stuck on such a planet finally letting loose. The soldiers with him glanced at each other. It wasn't safe around Kor when he lost his temper. Men had been known to die.

As they passed through the halls of the council building, Kor put an iron hand on his anger. He was about to deal with an idiotic people. An icy calm would serve his purpose better. They would understand threats plainly stated, plainly carried out.

He glanced around as he entered the room and his eyes fell on a figure dressed in a gold tunic standing off to one side. For the briefest of moments Kor stood rooted to the spot. Wide-set hazel eyes met his unwaveringly, light brown hair spilled forward over the tall forehead. Kor felt his heart skip a beat as he was instantly transported back fifteen years to Deneb 12. He was no longer in the hall of the Council of Elders, he was standing in front of a munitions dump looking into the face of a man from his past.

He shook himself back to the present but his eyes continued to hold those of the silent figure. There was no welcoming smile. There was only hatred and challenge shining out of the clear eyes. The man carried an air of authority that Kor had seen only once before. A smile touched his lips - he had finally met a worthy adversary among a planet of sheep. The smile widened slightly as he saw helpless anger burn on the other's face.

Only a few moments had passed. He knew that only for two of them had it seemed longer.

"This is the ruling council?"

He was surprised when one of the mild looking men spoke. He had half suspected that the man in gold would have been the Organian leader. What didn't surprise him was that he was welcomed. Obviously these people were too timid to take a stand. He felt only contempt for the men sitting at the table.

He turned to the silent, angry man, his interest rising. This was the kind of reaction he would have expected

from a conquered people. His eyes were met squarely. This man was not frightened or in awe of the invaders. Nor obviously was he happy they were there. Why was he different?

"Who are you?"

The man had no chance to answer, Ayelborne did it for him. "Oh, he is Baronier, one of our leading citizens."

Kor's eyebrows rose. The tone sounded anxious as if the Organian was trying to assure him of something. He glanced momentarily at Baronier. He didn't look like a man who had others answer for him. He looked back at Ayelborne.

"And he has no tongue?"

"I have a tongue."

The voice could have been Syn's. Years had passed but the clear, quiet voice was as familiar as if he had heard it yesterday. Controlled anger, no fear. Direct. Still those burning eyes held him. Kor's interest grew. He smiled at the silent challenge the man held out. He turned back to where Baronier was standing and walked around him. The build was almost identical to the one he remembered. He noted that the man stood his ground, quiet, yet alert, in total command of himself.

"Good, you shall be taught how to use it."

He watched Baronier closely. The man was trying hard to lower his gaze, to look subservient, and failing. Kor knew this man was servant to no one. He decided on a frontal assault to see if he could shake this man.

"Where is your smile?"

His tactics worked. He caught the man off guard. The answer was too quick, almost surprised.

"My what?"

Kor looked at the other Organians and felt his contempt for them rise again. "The stupid, idiotic smile everyone else seems to be wearing."

He glanced back to Baronier but the smile didn't appear. Interesting.

He turned to the other stranger. He had noticed the Vulcan when he had first walked in. A member of the Federation - he might prove useful when hostilities broke out, provided he wasn't a spy. He decided to find out just what kind of man he was dealing with.

"A Vulcan..."

Like Baronier, the dark eyes met his squarely. Unlike the Organian there was no expression, no hint of what the Vulcan was thinking. Kor walked over to him.

"...do you also have a tongue?"

The Vulcan bowed slightly but the action could have meant anything, greeting, acknowledgement, submission? Kor had never dealt with a Vulcan before. He could not read the man and it bothered him. He liked to know what was going on in a man's mind. It made him easier to deal with.

"I am Spock, a dealer in kivas and trillium."

Kor's sixth sense told him the answer was wrong. Whatever this man was he was not a merchant.

"You do not look like a storekeeper. Take this man - Vulcans are members of the Federation. He may be a spy..."

"He's no spy!"

Kor was not prepared for Baronier's reaction and swung around to meet both open hostility and a glimpse of something very close to alarm. He watched shrewdly as the man tried quickly to compose himself and look humble. A glance at the men seated at the table showed only bland smiles. Obviously they cared little what happened to the Vulcan. Why was Baronier different? He intended to find out. He turned and walked over to face him.

"Well, have we a ram among the sheep?"

The stance remained humble, the hands clasped tightly together in submission, but the eyes betrayed him. A deep burning hatred shone out. The Vulcan meant something to him. What?

"You object to us taking him?"

"He's done nothing, nothing at all."

A brave man, thought Kor, to show he cares. How like the Denebian he is. Aloud he said, "Coming from an Organian yours is practically an act of rebellion. Very good."

He looked at the table. Still no change, bland smiles. He no longer felt annoyed but found himself wondering again why Baronier was so different. He knew he would have no fight from the ruling council. He smiled slightly. "So, you welcome me..." He swung around and looked Baronier squarely in the eye, looking for any change of expression. "...do you also welcome me?"

He was right. This man was very different. The hazel eyes didn't waver. The man made no effort to conceal his emotion. And, interestingly, he avoided answering the question.

"You are here, there's nothing I can do about it."

A simple statement, an honest answer, a challenge? Kor found himself starting to appreciate the man as he had appreciated Syn. He could understand his reaction where he could not understand the utter passivity of everyone else.

He turned to the Council of Elders and gave his orders. No change in the smiles, no arguments, only acceptance. Except from the silent gold-clad figure. There was no acceptance there.

"You disapprove, Baronet."

It was not a question. He wanted this man to understand how easily he could be read. There was no backing down. The voice was deceptively mild.

"You need my approval?"

Kor looked at him searchingly. There was something behind the tone he couldn't catch. Suddenly it was important to know if this man would obey him.

"I need your obedience, nothing more. Will I have it?"

Again the answer gave him pause. Baronet avoided the question as neatly as he had the last.

"You seem to be in command."

Their eyes held. There was no conquerer and conquered here. This man was not bowing down. Kor's eyes spoke far more than his words and he knew his message was read.

"Yes, I am."

He suddenly found himself wondering if he was. Once before he had been confident and lost to a man such as this. He would keep a closer eye on this one. He smiled at Baronet's rejection of liaison. Perhaps he was scared after all. Maybe the challenge he had put up was only a front.

His new confidence suddenly left him as he gave orders for the Vulcan to be taken. He had said that Spock could possibly die. Something flickered in Baronet's eyes. What was it? Fear? Desperation? It happened in a split second as the guards moved. Baronet started forward, his fist tightly clenched. To do what? Kor's hand flew out to find a body as tense as steel under the soft cloth. Syn's body had been like that. Kor smiled at the burning eyes, appreciating the courage it took to openly defy him.

"You do not like to be pushed..."

There was no retreat, the body under his hand did not relax, the fist remained clenched. The man was vastly outnumbered but somehow Kor felt it made no difference, just as it had made none on Deneb 12. Baronet could possibly be as dangerous as Syn.

His uneasiness about Baronet grew more than it abated. He was quiet enough as he was given the general directives. If anything he looked slightly bitter. Before Kor could start to find out why, they were interrupted by the arrival of the Vulcan. Kor watched the two men closely as he talked. They said nothing but their few glances spoke volumes. Baronet looked worried at first then somehow seemed reassured and yes, it could only be pride that shone out of his eyes as the Klingon lieutenant told of the unsuccessful use of the mind sifter. Pride for the Vulcan? Why? The Vulcan seemed unworried about being threatened, pausing only to give a slight bow before he left. Submission? Mockery? Baronet seemed to accept his possible death if he resisted as a matter of fact. Kor wondered at it. One fought and died with one's own people, it was an accepted fact of Klingon life. Organians didn't fight. Who was this Baronet?



The hours sped past. Kor was pleased to note that the occupation orders were posted conspicuously all over the city. Everything seemed peaceful. It was obvious that Baronet was a man who was obeyed. Kor could not remember any other conquered people who put up no resistance. Perhaps his threat of the mind-sifter had made Baronet realize the senselessness of opposition. He felt a small stab of disappointment. He thought he had found Syn - perhaps he hadn't.

He fell into bed exhausted but unable to sleep, thinking of the large invasion force that would be fighting with the Federation fleet. He had had reports that a starship had been fired upon near Organia and had fled with no returned fire. Kor laughed. It would be easy to defeat these people. They had no fight, no desire of conquest. If only he could be a part of it.

He finally fell asleep only to be blasted out of his bed by huge detonations as the entire munitions dump outside the citadel blew up. The explosions were deafening and the brilliant fire lit up the sky. In a fury he sent all troops running into the streets to gather up everyone they found. This was an act of sabotage, plain and simple. There was no way those arms could have ignited themselves. A huge stockpile gone. There would be repercussions. The ones responsible would be caught and severely punished as an example for any others who might be contemplating the same action. The errors of Deneb 12 would not be repeated.

His chief lieutenant entered. "The intercom system is completely installed, Commander, all recording devices are working and telecommunications set up. You can monitor all audio from here and the visual components are in the next room."

Kor eyed the lieutenant and saw the man fidget under the gaze. He scared easily, this man - that could be a danger. Scared men talked. He would have to see about getting him replaced. For now he was safe enough under observation.

"Very good, Lieutenant." Kor watched the man's stiff salute and hurried departure. Idly he flicked a switch and listened in astonishment to a most unexpected conversation. He quickly summoned his guards.

They were all there. Somehow the man in gold didn't seem surprised to see him. Calm eyes met his exactly like Syn's had when they stood alone those many years ago - no fear, only equal facing equal. Even the threat of the mind-scanner drew little reaction. The Vulcan seemed tense at his threats - more so because they were directed at Baroner and not at him. When it had been his life at stake earlier there had been a calm acceptance. Now there was a controlled tension lurking dangerously under the surface.

Kor's anger and frustration lashed out at the Organians sitting so placidly, doing nothing to help the one man who had dared to stand and fight.

"Always it is the brave ones who die, the soldiers. I hope you will continue to savour the sweetness of your life. You disgust me!"

Still no change. Still only the mild attitudes. And from the mildest of them came the startling information that instantly explained the enigma that was Baroner...

"...Captain of the USS Enterprise - a starship commander!"

The hazel eyes acknowledged it, the bold stance now seemed correct, as it should be. Kor mentally saluted Syn. He had found his equal. His eyes flicked to the Vulcan standing at Kirk's side, his presence now fully explained.

"...and his First Officer?" He had heard that Kirk had a Vulcan First Officer, possibly the same man Kor had seen beside Christopher Pike. The dark eyes met his unwaveringly. Kor knew the Vulcan would now be very dangerous, almost as dangerous as the man beside him. Suddenly Kor no longer felt left out of the battle. James Kirk was possibly the best commanding officer in Starfleet, and Kirk was now his prisoner. No longer did the loss of the munitions dump seem important. The capture of a Federation Captain and his First Officer was a prize that would be almost impossible to calculate.

Kor had known from the start that questioning Kirk would gain him nothing, but the man fascinated him. He had caused considerable trouble practically single handed. Kor had felt from the moment he first saw this man that he was facing an equal for the first time since Deneb 12. He found himself regretting the fact that he might have to use the mind-sifter on this one. He felt nothing for inferiors who went through the torture but he didn't want that to happen to this man.

He got no answers to his questions. There was steel in this man's makeup. Only when he threatened to kill the Vulcan did any break show in the defenses - Syn had the same reaction to the threat of another's death - yet Kor felt that even the death of his First Officer would not get Kirk to talk. He hesitated momentarily, then did something he had never done before. He put off using the mind-sifter.

"Twelve hours, Captain."

Kirk's expression closed. Looking at him Kor knew that his reprieve would be useless. The words were as firm as the eyes.

"It will take a lot longer than that, Commander."

It was then that Kor knew with certainty that he would have to use the mind-sifter and destroy this man. For only the second time in his life he felt regret.

The regret lasted exactly seven hours before the news arrived that he no longer had anyone to use the mind-sifter on. The lieutenant was so scared he was practically babbling when he told of the prisoners' escape. Kor kept his temper under tight control. He was dealing with dangerous men now, not sheep. He was dealing with something he understood. He would deal out something that they understood - death.

His warning went out. Two hundred people died, yet there was no word, no sign of the two Federation men. Time passed. The deadline was up and still the prisoners were missing. Kor's temper flared. He could get no fight out of any of the Organians - they didn't seem to care if everyone died. Didn't they understand the finality of death? In a fury, he ordered two hundred more should die.

He should have known they would come, even through all his guards. He should have anticipated it and been better prepared. He looked at Kirk with a grudging respect. The Human looked almost bouyant as he stopped short of the desk, his phaser leveled at Kor's chest. Syn had looked that way when he stood over the Klingon so long ago.

"Just stay where you are, Commander."

Kor froze, not moving as the Vulcan took his weapon. He slowly looked behind Kirk to see the white light shining. A small smile touched his face. He was not alone.

"You have done well to get this far through my guards."

The Vulcan told him what he wanted to know. Some of his men were no longer functioning. How many and where, he wondered. He sat down, slowly crossing his hands, giving himself time to think and his men time to get organized. The Human was getting a little too confident. Kor wanted to give him enough rope to hang himself.

"So, you are here. You will be interested in knowing that a Federation fleet is on its way here at the moment. Our fleet is preparing to meet them."

A gleam shone out of Kirk's eyes. The *Enterprise* had made it! A smile crossed his face.

"Checkmate, Commander."

Kor watched approvingly as Kirk motioned Spock to check the open grill behind the desk. He had shown his weakness in admitting he would not kill unless absolutely necessary. That was why the Klingons were stronger. That was why they ultimately would be the conquerors. Men like Syn and Kirk didn't seem to understand it.

He was a bit surprised that Kirk did not suspect they were being monitored. He would have thought the Federation would have much the same system. However, it was to his benefit, for Kirk was walking into a trap and he couldn't resist pointing it out.

"You know why we are so strong? Because we are a unit - each of us is part of a greater whole. Always under surveillance, even a commander like myself..." he pointed to the bright light that suddenly went out, "...always under surveillance, Captain..."

But things didn't happen the way he had planned. The Human and Vulcan were vastly outnumbered but there might as well have been a hundred of them for all the use his men were. He ran to the desk, only to drop the red-hot weapon.

He barely heard Kirk's exchange with the Vulcan. His attention was on Ayelborne and Claymore as they came to the doorway. Gone were the vacant smiles. In their place was a look of condemnation mixed with sorrow. Kor felt a chill go down his spine.

He heard with astonishment that the Organians were stopping the war. He found himself siding with Kirk, agreeing with his anger at their interference. He joined in with Kirk's protests but grew silent as Ayelborne asked in mild reproach if Kirk was defending the right to wage war, the killing of millions of innocent people...

Kor quietly urged Kirk to fight, but one look at the Human's face made him realize that the fight had ended.

They stood silently for a few moments after the Organians had disappeared, the enormity of the beings they had met still difficult to comprehend. Spock explained it but his words were hard to believe.

He looked at Kirk and saw a slight twinkle in the once angry eyes, an acceptance of what had happened. Kor was annoyed at the Organians but couldn't help responding in kind. This was a man standing across from him. He had met very few.

A slight grin crossed Kirk's face. "Well, Commander, I guess that takes care of the war. Obviously the Organians aren't going to let us fight."

Kor sighed at the lost prospect, a gleam shining from his eyes as he pictured the battle that now would not happen.

"A shame, Captain, it would have been glorious!"



Kor stood by himself for several minutes after Kirk and his First Officer had beamed up. He had been seeing not only a Starship Captain but also a young man dressed in black who had faced him without fear, as Kirk had faced him. Two men, two leaders, two warriors who did not want to fight. Two men who could look an enemy in the face and let him live. Kor sighed. In his entire life he had met only two men he considered his equal and they were both irrevocably opposed to him and everything he stood for. Yet they had both acknowledged him without words. They were both strong men who recognized in the other those things that made a man great.

Kor shook his head and picked up his communicator.

"Someday..."





EPILOGUE



The mist that had filled the Guardian faded as the two men left to face...what? Their future...or an alien world.

"Good luck, gentlemen."

Aye, and we'll miss you...

"Happiness at least, sir."

So little to offer. I hope he finds it, whatever happens...



The mists rose thick and swirling, spilling over their boundaries. From its depths they came, side by side as they had left. They stood silent, the Vulcan's dark eyes not leaving Kirk's face.

The words came by themselves as Scotty took in the man before him - the pale face, the too-bright eyes.

"What happened, sir? You only left a moment ago..."

And in that time have been through hell!

It was as if he hadn't spoken. His captain's face did not change - he did not answer.

The mists in the Guardian swirled more thickly and a third person emerged. McCoy's eyes were on Kirk; he did not acknowledge the others' welcoming smiles. His face was lined with sorrow as he looked at his friend. Kirk took no more notice of him than he had of the others.

Jin - she had to die. Spock told me the reason. You knew you had to stop me - and you did. But the pain it caused...so obvious and so deep...forgiveness comes so hard...

The silence drew out. Without taking his eyes from his captain Spock said, "We were successful."

Yes, Jin, we were successful. We have our future now because of you. But it was close. What would you have done if I had not called out? Would you have stopped McCoy if my voice had not reminded you of what was at stake? By stopping him you allowed her death. Will you ever be able to forgive?

"Time has resumed its shape. All is as it was before. Many such journeys are possible. Let me be your gateway..."

Tears were building in the hazel eyes as he desperately tried not to remember. The words seemed to come from far away.

"Captain, the Enterprise is up there. They're asking if we want to beam up..."

What's happened to you? Why are Spock and the doctor watching you so closely? Why are you so close to tears? What could possibly have hurt you so badly?

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

But hell won't be left here. It will follow. The feel of her arms, the sound of her laughter...the truck, Spock's shout, my arms around McCoy, her scream...

Edith - will I ever be able to forgive myself...





The halls were quiet, only the echo of his footsteps accompanied him as he made his way through the silent ship. The dress uniform stressed the lines of his slender body, the dim lights accented his alien features. The grace of his movements underlined his strength, the controlled features carried with them the air of authority.

From his position at the entrance to his quarters, McCoy watched the Vulcan's approach. They had said little to each other since their return from the planet, that argument which now seemed so senseless still held them apart. As Spock drew near, McCoy stepped out into the corridor.

"Spock..." The Vulcan stopped in the shadows, his face unreadable.

"Spock, I..."

There was no response - he stood silently, hands clasped behind his back. McCoy could feel his face starting to burn.

"Oh, forget it!" he snapped and disappeared into his quarters, wishing he could slam the door behind him.

"Blast him anyway," cursed McCoy, "he certainly isn't making the situation any easier."

The Vulcan stood looking at the closed door. He knew what the doctor was going through but it was useless to try to talk with him. They would only start arguing again and that would not help to solve anything.

Looking down the corridor, he hesitated. He did not want to face his captain. The last few hours had been difficult enough, the ceremony, the dinner with the Fleet admirals, the speeches, the citations, and all that time being so aware of Kirk's agony - that private agony that showed itself only to those few who knew him best. Kirk had endured the speeches, had even made one of his own with only the slightly deeper tone and small tremor to betray his feelings. Then he had left, leaving Spock to escort the dignitaries to the transporter, to say the appropriate farewells.

But he would have to face him, to report the departure of the delegation, there was no point in delaying it. He walked the few remaining feet and stopped outside the door. The plate bore a simple name - James T. Kirk. Just a name - looking at it brought back a flood of memories.

An appeal had come from the underground leaders of Dacara to the Federation for their planet was well within the sphere of the Federation's influence. The Klingons were planning to use the planet as a base of operations from which to launch attacks on neighboring planets. They could do nothing to stop it; they needed help. The *Enterprise's* orders from Base 9 were simple - if possible, stop the Klingons and, above all, stop Dotstros - self-made dictator of Dacara.



Jim Kirk was very subdued as the *Enterprise* made its way to Dacara. Leonard McCoy put his lunch tray down on the table and sat down, noticing the captain's untouched meal.

"You've been very quiet since we left Starbase 9, Jim. Anything wrong?"

Kirk shook his head but his face flushed slightly.

"Come on, out with it."

Kirk smiled faintly. "Bones, my past is coming back to haunt me." McCoy's eyebrows shot up.

"No, it's nothing like that." He ran his hands through his hair. "When I was at the Academy I met a girl. Not just any girl, Bones, but the girl. Her name was Fara, she was in the year ahead of me. She was beautiful, intelligent, and a bit of a rebel. I loved her so much..." He drummed his fingers on the table and said very softly, "It was my fault that we broke up but she was so jealous, so possessive - it got to the point where I couldn't move without hysterical accusations from her. If I so much as looked at another girl I was in for a bitter argument. She couldn't stand the thought of me going into space - that's when we broke up. We had one last,

violent argument - I haven't seen her since."

McCoy looked confused. Kirk got up and picked up his tray. Looking down he said, "Fara is the leader of the underground on Dacara."

Spock had been sent ahead to the planet with a small group from the Starbase. Vulcan traders were common in the area and he could move about freely without drawing suspicion to himself. But something had gone wrong, the reports had stopped coming to the *Enterprise* and finally the silence became unbearable.

"I'm beaming down, Mr. Scott. You have the con. If you come in contact with any Klingon ships, get in touch with Starfleet. Don't take them on alone unless you have no choice."

"Jim, you can't be serious about going down there!" objected McCoy. "You don't know where Spock is - you don't even know if he's alive!"

"Agreed, Doctor, I don't. But in his last transmission he reported that the Klingons were massing for attack, but he was unable to say where and the Federation can't protect all the planets in this quadrant. We've got to get down there and stop this, or at least find out what their plans are."

"We?" said McCoy, apprehension clouding his face.

"Yes, 'we', Doctor McCoy. As you said yourself, we don't know if Spock and the others are dead or alive. We may need to do a patching job and you are the best qualified."



So McCoy found himself beside the captain being led through the back streets of the capital city of Dacara, running like fugitives from the uniformed patrols that frequented the area. Finally they arrived at their destination. Descending a long flight of stairs, they were suddenly blinded by a bright light which prevented them from being able to see anything beyond it. Instinctively, they tried to shield their eyes but the light quickly dimmed and they were able to make out the figure standing behind it.

Kirk stood rooted to the spot as the girl came closer to them. She was tall for a Dacaran, her long, red hair softly framing her face, the green eyes sparkling with something close to mischievousness, but the pale face was solemn, the voice deep and controlled.

"Hello, Jim."

McCoy glanced at his captain, then looked quickly from the girl to Kirk and back again.

"It's a long way from the Academy, Fara," replied Kirk.

"And a longer way from the world that you and I knew together then, Jim. There we had the future, here there is only the harsh reality of the present."

"Uh, excuse me..."

Kirk started guiltily. "Sorry, Bones, didn't mean to leave you out in the cold. Dr. McCoy, I would like you to meet Fara-Talet, former Starfleet cadet, now..."

"Now a full-fledged revolutionary, Dr. McCoy. I'm pleased to meet you." She smiled as she spoke and McCoy thought he had never seen anyone so lovely. It was no wonder Kirk was attracted to her. Turning to the captain, her smile fading, she continued, "Dotstros has your Vulcan friend. My contacts report he was arrested yesterday. I don't know if they suspect him of being a Federation spy or if he just broke one of Dacara's many laws. My operatives are infiltrating the prison now to discover what has become of him, but I don't think there is much we can do."

"Thank you, Fara. I know you'll do all you can."

Something in the tone of his voice made her carefully scan his face, then her green eyes grew grave and her voice lowered. "Jim, our request goes against the prime directive, but will the Federation give us aid?"

"If the Klingons start an attack you will have your aid, Fara, I promise." Kirk was uncomfortable. He was very aware of Fara's presence and tried to shut her closeness out of his mind. He needed it clear for the operation ahead and could not afford to give in to the emotions once felt by a seventeen-year-old cadet.

Another man quietly entered the room. Like all Dacarans, he was small and slightly built, but what startled Kirk and McCoy was the fact that he was dressed in the uniform of Dotstros' personal guard. Before he could react, Kirk was stopped by Fara's amused laugh.

"Relax, Jim, this is Staltus, one of Dotstros' trusted commanders - and my right hand man. Without him the underground movement would be worthless."

Kirk stared at the Dacaran. "How do you avoid suspicion?" he asked with some surprise.

"Easy, Captain," replied Staltus, "I am a very nasty person. For example, you are the enemy and under arrest. I shall personally take you to Dotstros."

Kirk slowly got to his feet. "Now wait just a minute..."

Staltus smiled. "Hear me out, Captain. I have just come from Dotstros' private cells. The Vulcan is there

and under heavy guard. They know who he is, they know why he is here. No, he hasn't talked but some of those who came with him have - they are now dead. There is only one way to get him out of there, Captain, and that is to arrest you. Dotstros will be expecting an attempt to free the Vulcan. If you are captured it will distract him, take the pressure away from us. I take you in - Fara gets you out."

"But what about the Klingons?" interrupted McCoy. "While all of you are running around, they're off somewhere laying waste to a Federation planet."

"Not quite, Doctor," replied Fara. "While the rescue attempt is going on, Staltus will be in the Klingon headquarters taping all the invasion plans."

"I am well known to the Klingons, Doctor," laughed Staltus. "I am every bit as ruthless as they are and respected for it. Now, Captain, shall we go?"

As they stood up, Fara touched Kirk's arm. "This Vulcan, he's very important to you, isn't he?"

Kirk looked at her somberly and nodded. "He's my friend."

McCoy watched their exchange with some apprehension. He remembered Kirk's description of Fara's possessiveness and as Kirk spoke something darkened Fara's face, but he said nothing. Warning could come later if the rescue attempt was successful.

They were almost at their destination when they ran into a Klingon detail. Upon discovering the identity of Staltus' prisoner, they got rough and Kirk was torn away from the Dacaran's protective custody. It was only his quick demand that Kirk be brought conscious to Dotstros that prevented Kirk from being killed on the spot.

The interrogation had gone on for several hours but the conversation was still very one-sided. Spock, his arms tightly strapped to the pillar behind him, was focusing his attention on the unusual carvings on the ceiling across the room. His mind was recording the threats made by the Dacaran leader but he made no effort to answer. There was a commotion at the door and a number of Klingon soldiers came in supporting a limping figure. Spock came rigidly to attention - it was his captain! Their eyes met across the room, each conveying to the other that he was all right.

"Well, Staltus, I did not expect you back here again tonight. Who is this person that the Klingons find so interesting?" His eyes lit up in delight when Staltus disclosed Kirk's identity.

"James T. Kirk - captain of a Federation starship, an elite vessel, a very important and valuable man indeed. The people of Dacara are fortunate to have you - as allies of the Klingon Empire you can well understand our interest in your presence here."

At that moment, James Kirk didn't look very important. He had not arrived at his present situation without a struggle. His clothes were dirty and torn - several nasty bruises were already forming on his face. His eyes were not fixed on the Dacaran leader but on the figure of his first officer. Seeing his gaze, the Dacaran laughed. Kirk could feel his anger rise, his anger against this pudgy little man who dared to pledge the support of a peaceful planet to the atrocities committed by the Klingon Empire.



The next few hours were unpleasant but not intolerable. Finally, Kirk and Spock were taken to a cell deep in the foundation of the building. Kirk sank down on the rough boards which served as a bed and massaged his throbbing ankle. He glanced at Spock and grinned.

"I twisted it going up a flight of stairs, all by myself."

The Vulcan looked pained but proceeded to tear strips from an old blanket and strap up the ankle. Kirk tried walking around the cell and found it much easier.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock - you just may be in line for McCoy's job some day."

"I am not qualified for life sciences, Captain, you know that."

"Um," said Kirk, but his attention was held by a large stone at the back of the cell. It was definitely moving outward.

"The friends you were talking about, Captain?"

"I would presume so, Spock, or someone who has taken the wrong turn during his afternoon stroll."

"Sir?" said Spock, puzzled. But he received no answer for the stone had ceased moving and Fara was scrambling out behind a husky and incredibly dirty young man. Her quick gaze took in Kirk and then more slowly moved over Spock who returned the stare with no expression on his face. He was, however, fully aware of the concern that was shown in that first look that had fallen on Kirk - and the obvious dislike directed at him.

"You're certainly punctual, Fara," said Kirk.

"We must hurry, Jim. The Klingons have decided to send out the first forces tomorrow - we didn't think that it would happen until next week."

The small group hurried through the dark passages behind the cell walls. They were forced to join hands; even Spock with his incredible eyesight was totally blind in the enveloping darkness, but the young guide made no errors

and they were soon back at Fara's headquarters. McCoy and Staltus were waiting for them, a pile of computer tapes in front of them and a small computer on the table already activated. An immediate council of war was held, opinions and arguments came thick and fast. McCoy watched the proceedings with a worried expression. Jim Kirk had his hands full - he was not dealing with trained military personnel. Fara had been in Starfleet but was no longer - most of the group were dedicated to the survival of their planet, but they were all individuals, not the smooth fighting machine that Kirk was used to dealing with. He noticed that Spock was also watching, offering opinions only when asked. His silence underlined his disapproval of the direction the meeting was taking.

Finally Kirk leaned back and looked directly at his first officer. He had been aware of the Vulcan's growing silence. "Comments, Mr. Spock?"

Spock looked at Fara-Talet, conscious of the Dacaran's coolness toward him. For some reason she seemed to feel him a threat. He didn't have time to analyse it further, but as he spoke he could feel her increasing hostility.

"Captain, unaided there is little we can do to stop the Klingons. From my observations, the people here are not well organized and they have a limited number of weapons. Moreover, they do not take orders well and seem to have little respect for their leaders. They are apt to do whatever they want in a given situation which would make any assault on the Klingons highly dangerous."

Fara's face flushed at his words but Spock had eyes only for his captain. Kirk was silent for a few moments, then said, "Recommendations?"

"I would suggest contacting the *Enterprise*, have them relay this information to Starbase 9. As they are already on alert status, they could have ships covering both planets specified in the Klingon report."

"Be sensible, Jim," broke in McCoy. "Spock is right, this is a matter for the Federation now, not for us - it's too big. We need help."

Fara rose to her feet, her eyes blazing. "So this is how our 'friends' intend to help us, to allow the Federation to destroy our planet. You know what will happen - they will try to stop the Klingons before they have a chance to mobilize their fleet." She turned to Kirk who had also risen. "Famous starship captain - defender of the oppressed. I hope you are proud of yourself. I hope you can live with yourself when this planet is a dead hulk floating in space!" Turning abruptly, she fled from the room. Staltus got up slowly.

"Captain, you obviously do not understand our ways. For that, we shall probably die. Remember us." His quiet gaze included all of them, and then he was gone.

Kirk turned back to Spock and McCoy, his face hard, his eyes anguished.

"Captain," said Spock, "we must contact the *Enterprise* immediately - the longer we delay the more difficult it will be to prevent the Klingon raids."

Kirk took out his communicator, looking at it as if he had never seen it before. It was a special long-range, sub-space transmitter, capable of reaching the *Enterprise* although it was out of orbit and out of the range of the Klingon sensors. Staltus had retrieved it from where Dotstros had put it during his interrogation earlier. He flipped it open and triggered the signalling device. Almost immediately Scotty's voice came through.

"Captain! Thank heaven - are you all right? Did you find Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Scotty, everything is secure here. Implement plan B. The Klingons are going to try to get to Schalos VI and Deneb II. They must be stopped before they leave here. Are the other ships with you?"

"They will be soon, sir. They left Starbase 9 a few hours ago. As soon as we are in range we'll beam you up."

"Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy will beam up, Scotty. I'm staying here."

"But, sir...!"

"That's an order, Mr. Scott. Kirk out."

Shutting the communicator, Kirk looked up. "You say these people are leaderless, Mr. Spock. I'm going to do what I can to help."

"Jim," said McCoy, "just because you're fond of the girl..."

"That's enough, Doctor. I don't need your moralizing. Beam up to the ship when it gets here. That's an order!"

Kirk ran quickly through the streets heading for the munitions dump. He knew Fara was in charge of its destruction. Maybe there was something he could do to help. A little distance behind, Spock and McCoy followed. Both were concerned about the captain - his emotional reaction to the situation made Spock decide it was necessary to disobey Kirk's order to return to the ship.

"Blast it, Spock," McCoy was saying, "stop him! Have him beamed aboard - do something!"

"I am attempting to do something, Doctor. If you will be quiet I might be able to concentrate." McCoy glared at him but stopped talking.

Kirk stopped short as he got to the stockpile. Fara was there along with a dozen or so of her group. And with

them were the same number of Klingons. He quietly backed up and bumped into Spock and McCoy who had stopped a few feet behind him.

"What are you two doing here?" he demanded.

"The Klingons are beaming aboard their vessels, Captain," replied Spock, avoiding Kirk's question. "I believe that is the signal for the Federation to attack, is it not?"

Kirk nodded.

"Then there is nothing more we can do here, Jim. This area will come under full phaser fire within a matter of minutes. Everything will be vaporized. We must leave."

Kirk looked at him, mute agony showing on his face.

"Now listen, Spock," said McCoy, understanding Kirk's anguish, "there are twelve people who wanted no part of this. We can't just walk away from them - leave them to die!"

"We are three people, Doctor, three people against the awesome might of the Federation fleet. What we do or don't do here will make no difference to the outcome. If we attempt the rescue, we will die. If we leave, and survive, we might be able to help avoid such a situation again."

"You're not only not-human, Spock, but even a Vulcan couldn't sanction what you just said..."

Kirk's quiet voice interrupted him. He was looking at Fara, only he did not see the revolutionary leader but the Starfleet officer he had once loved. "No, Fara, I don't understand you and for that you'll die, as surely as if I was holding the phaser." His eyes filling with tears, he turned to the others, "Come on, both of you, let's get out of here!"

"Jim, you can't leave them there!"

But Kirk was already started down the street. Spock grabbed McCoy by the arm. "Come on, Doctor, we can argue about this later."

They ran after a quickly disappearing Kirk. Suddenly the ground erupted underneath them and a blinding flash lit up the entire area. They flung themselves to the ground as debris rained about them. Finally the explosions died away and the gloom of the night closed in on them again. Spock and McCoy cautiously got to their feet. Looking back they saw only a large depression in the ground where the munitions dump had been.

Kirk was lying face down when they reached him. Spock put a restraining hand on McCoy's arm, preventing him from going any further, for he had seen the shaking shoulders and the head buried deep in the area. Jim Kirk needed the privacy of his grief.



Spock's vision cleared, the name on the door came back into focus. Taking a deep breath he pressed the buzzer. The door slid open.

Kirk was lying on his bed, his dress uniform thrown on the chair beside him, the black shirt and pants he was wearing contrasting with the pale face. He did not acknowledge Spock's presence.

"Our guests have left, Captain. We are on course 24 mark 3, as you ordered."

Still no response. The Vulcan's dark eyes narrowed and he took a hesitant step toward the bed. "Jim..." he began.

Kirk sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, his back toward his friend. Spock stopped short, then turned to leave, but Kirk's voice brought him to a halt.

"Spock, do you know what jealousy is?"

"It is a state where one is resentful toward another on account of known or suspected rivalry."

"Yes, I suppose that's the correct definition. For Fara-Talet was jealous, Spock. She was jealous enough to want us to die."

"I don't understand, Captain."

Kirk got up and walked over to where Spock was standing. "I loved her once. I loved her so much that I actually considered leaving the service. She wanted me to - we broke up when I didn't. She couldn't accept that. Spock, she didn't want to help with your rescue. And that outburst at the council meeting - she was trying to get me to go with her, to leave you, to leave the *Enterprise*. She was jealous, insanely jealous. And I didn't see it. I was acting just as blindly as she was." Kirk turned away, his voice shaking, "I almost killed all of us because I couldn't see past a jealous woman!"

Spock put a hand on Kirk's shoulder, his quiet voice just reaching Kirk's ears. "Jim, you showed compassion, you were trying to help people who had reached out to you. That is the person you are. That is why you receive the kind of devotion which can lead to jealousy. We all reach out, each in our own way."

Kirk turned around, his eyes locking onto the Vulcan's face. Spock kept his gaze steady - did nothing to cover the wide-open, revealing look that shone from his eyes. For a moment they stood, not as alien and commander, but as

two men who knew the meaning of friendship. Then Kirk smiled, mischief showing in his face.

"I think I will transfer you to life sciences, Mr. Spock. You are definitely wasting your time as first officer."

"I fear that it would not be a wise decision, Captain. The head of that department is not talking to me at the moment. A slight misunderstanding concerning Vulcan ethics."

"Um," replied Kirk, "I seem to recall hearing that argument - one of a series, I believe. Well, perhaps you would be better off with your present duties."

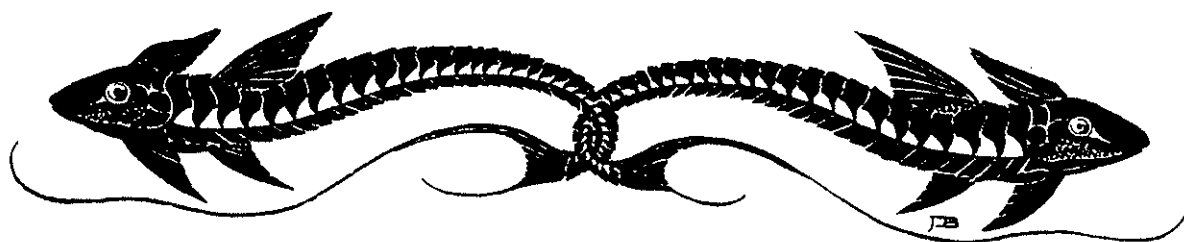
"In this case, Captain, I am inclined to agree."

Kirk looked at the communicator on the desk. "But, in case I change my mind, I think we had better get the department heads at least acknowledging each other's presence." Hitting the intercom, he said, "Dr. McCoy, this is Captain Kirk. Report to my quarters immediately." He looked up to see the Vulcan getting out the Saurian brandy and some glasses.

"You approve, Mr. Spock?"

"Of your summoning the doctor, sir, the answer is yes. Of this," he held the brandy up, "I would prefer to refrain from comment."

The door opened for McCoy to show Jim Kirk looking in delighted astonishment at his first officer. The change in the captain pleased the doctor - the uncomfortable expression on Spock's face as McCoy noticed the bottle of brandy delighted him further. Kirk saw McCoy start to bounce up and down and smiled to himself. "This may start a squabble," he thought, "but at least they will be talking to each other!"





The furnishings told a great deal about the occupant. To the casual observer they would appear strange, imposing, and uninviting. To the educated, they would suggest a certain culture, showing the influences which shaped and guided it, the veiled walls, the flickering light at the bottom of the guardian, the various articles about the room which suggested a warlike race.

He was there. There was an unearthly stillness about this man watching the flickering flame. It danced on his features, now highlighting a delicately pointed ear, now the dark hair finely sculpted to the shape of his head, now the high, arched eyebrows over brown eyes that never once wavered from the light that rose and fell in front of him. The greenish tone of his skin was emphasized by the odd light. His absolute immobility only added to the effect of his satanic appearance that many found so disturbing.

Commander Spock, Vulcan First Officer, Science Officer of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* had been motionless for many hours. It was the custom of his people to meditate, an aid in following their philosophy of non-emotion. For Spock, who was also half-human, this meditation was a necessary part of his existence. Human emotion was not as easily controlled as Vulcan, and he needed these quiet moments to deal with the two conflicting natures that often threatened to surface, unbidden and unwanted. For, fight as he would to present to the universe a being who was the Vulcan ideal, time and again these feelings would surface and betray the inner man.

This was one of these times - and again the cause was Captain James T. Kirk, commanding officer of the *Enterprise*, the one man in the universe to whom Spock had made a deep, yet silent commitment.

The cause of Spock's concern was also sitting motionless, but for a much different reason. Tousled brown hair and sleep-filled hazel eyes made him appear young - too young to be the commander of a starship. He was in obvious pain. The broken ribs, only partially healed when he had been released from Sickbay that morning, were making sleep almost impossible. In his attempt to get comfortable, Kirk had banged his side on the edge of the bed. Suddenly wide awake, he held his aching ribs until the pain subsided and he could lie down again.

The giant starship was silent, manned by night personnel. Kirk had almost succeeded in falling asleep when the intercom at the head of his bed rang.

"Kirk here."

"Message coming in from Starbase 12, sir. Priority one."

"On my way. Contact Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and Engineer Scott - have them report to the bridge. Kirk out."

Minutes later, Kirk arrived on the bridge. Spock and Scotty were there ahead of him. McCoy was the last to arrive, grumbling about the ridiculous hour and trying to pretend that he wasn't studying the captain. He noted that Kirk was still pale and there was an unusual sagging to his shoulders, but he didn't seem in distress.

"Message ready, sir."

"Put it on visual, Lieutenant."

The image of Admiral Wicker appeared on the screen, his face drawn. The situation was obviously an unpleasant one.

"Captain Kirk, we have just received a message from the troop ship *Norandy*. They have been attacked by the Haver fleet not far from the Haver home planet. They have taken Admiral Peter West and left the *Norandy* crippled. We have help on the way for the ship, but you're the closest help for Admiral West. The area around the Haver home planet is still disputed space, so the Federation has no clear legal grounds for the presence of a starship. If you're involved in any fighting - you're on your own."

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances, each fully aware of the danger that could lie ahead. Kirk looked back at the screen, knowing that his face reflected the grim look that he saw there.

"We'll do our best, sir. Kirk out."

"Peter West," said McCoy. "Wasn't he just elevated to Under-Secretary of the Cabinet?"

"He was, Doctor," answered Spock. "I presume he was on his way to Starfleet Headquarters to take up his new duties."

"Yes, well, obviously he didn't make it," said Kirk. "Spock, what do we know about the Havers?"

"Not much, Captain. They are a warlike, barbaric people. Their ships are archaic by our standards, powered by nuclear energy but possessing surprisingly sophisticated weaponry. They often stage raids on Federation outposts, choosing to plunder and steal rather than to bargain for their needs. Federation vessels that have encountered them report that they are shrewd fighters and show no mercy."

"Great," said McCoy. "For this I got out of bed?"

"I think we had better adjourn to the briefing room, gentlemen," said Kirk. "We need a plan - fast. Mr. Chekov, plot a course for Haver. Mr. Sulu, warp 6 as soon as possible." Looking at his three senior officers, he continued, "Shall we go?"



Kirk looked around the table. The situation was bad but he knew there were no better qualified people to handle it than those sitting in this room.

"You know the situation, gentlemen. Opinions?" As always, his first glance was at Spock and, as he knew they would be, the Vulcan's dark eyes were looking directly at him. "Mr. Spock?"

"The *Moreandy* ascertained that the Havers didn't take Admiral West to their home planet but to one of its satellites. They obviously expect some attempt to rescue the admiral - almost surely in the form of a starship. I would suggest sending the *Enterprise* to Haver as a decoy and a shuttlecraft to the satellite."

"They wouldn't have a chance!" blurted Scotty. Spock raised an eyebrow at the engineer's outburst, but almost immediately focused his attention back on Kirk. The captain had not reacted to Scotty's outburst but was obviously turning Spock's suggestion over in his mind. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

"Agree, Spock. But the shuttlecraft crew will only have a slim chance so we can't risk many people." He looked around the table, then continued. "I'll take the *Columbus*, Scotty and Bones will come with me. Spock, you'll be in command here. The Havers will be expecting you - you'll have to be careful. Stay long enough to let your presence be known, then get out. We'll leave the locational beam open on the shuttlecraft so you can find us. Hopefully, we'll be in orbit but, if anything goes wrong, you may have to come to get us."

Spock's expression told Kirk that his first officer didn't agree with his captain's delegation of duties, but he gave Spock no opportunity to argue.

"You have your assignments, gentlemen. Scotty, get the *Columbus* ready. We'll leave as soon as possible."

The group broke up. Kirk picked up some charts and started to leave, then noticed that McCoy was still sitting at the table, gentle and concerned eyes quietly analysing Kirk.

"Well, Doctor. What's troubling you?"

"At the moment, the Captain of the *Enterprise*. Jim, you've been out of Sickbay for what - fourteen hours? You were badly hurt in that rock fall on Darien VII. If you remember, I almost ordered a medical leave for you. Captain, I am seriously considering that leave to be ordered now."

"Bones," said Kirk gently, "I appreciate your concern, but we don't have any command pilots to spare on this mission, and we don't have time to order up replacements. I promise I won't stand at the bottom of any cliffs. Satisfied?"

"No, and I would get Spock to replace you except he was probably hurt worse than you. It never ceases to amaze me, whatever happens to you, he always manages to be in the thick of it. Well," he rose wearily, "I suppose I can keep you patched together long enough to find Admiral West. But, please Jim, take it easy?"



Spock met them on the flight deck. "An additional message just received from Starfleet, Captain - coded and scrambled. Admiral West was carrying the new defense plans for this entire sector of the Federation. Starfleet does not think the Havers suspect this, but if they should manage to acquire those plans..."

"...then we will be at war, Spock; a bloody, dirty war that could go on for years." Kirk rubbed his eyes, trying to will away the tired, defeated feeling that was plaguing him. A fleeting hint of worry crossed Spock's face, but when Kirk looked up, the Vulcan's mask was once again in place.

"All right, Spock," he said reassuringly, "we'll get West. Take care of yourself. Get the *Enterprise* out of this in one piece."

"I shall attempt to do so, sir. I trust you will do the same."

Kirk lightly touched Spock's arm and turned for the shuttlecraft. Spock watched the slightly limping stride,

his worry increasing as the captain entered the small ship. Then he left quickly for the bridge. This affair was going to be difficult, and it was going to get that way soon.



The shuttlecraft left the *Enterprise* and was soon approaching Havershangt - one of three satellite bodies in orbit around Haver. Kirk was studying the sensor readout of the small sphere. The report didn't sound very inviting - mountainous terrain and a frigid, windswept climate. There seemed to be only one inhabited area on the surface. Few life forms were registered, but one of those was distinctly humanoid.

"I don't suppose anyone is expecting a shuttlecraft, but we had better land under cover and go the rest of the way on foot," Kirk suggested. "With the mountains for cover, it should be fairly easy to land undetected."

"How far do we have to walk, Jim?" said McCoy with a bit of concern sounding in his voice.

"Shouldn't be too far, Bones. There's a sheltered area not too far from the settlement. Shouldn't be more than a mile or so."

"That's good. I joined the service as a doctor, not a marathon specialist."

Kirk smiled but made no comment, and missed the real reason for his friend's grumbling. McCoy was worried, really worried. He knew his captain wasn't up to much physical stress, and he had a feeling that a lot of trouble lay ahead of them.

They landed in the sheltered dip that had shown clearly on the sensors. Scotty handed out the phasers, McCoy got his medical kit, and they left the protection of the shuttlecraft. Kirk involuntarily coughed as the cold air hit his lungs. The sudden intake of breath alerted McCoy to the pain the damaged ribcage was still causing. Recovering quickly, Kirk waved McCoy away before the doctor could get his medi-scanner out.

"I'm all right, Bones. Scotty, how far?"

Scotty was studying his tri-corder. "Just over that ridge, Captain, about one kilometer."

"Good. We'll approach under cover. Don't do anything unless I give the word. Let's go."

No guards seemed to be posted near the small group of buildings. The tri-corder showed only one building to be occupied. They approached it silently. Looking in the window, Kirk saw four Haver guards. Further down, Scotty discovered Peter West in a smaller room. After a whispered conference, Kirk waved Scotty around to a side entry and motioned McCoy to come with him. They burst into the room catching the guards by surprise. They were quickly disarmed and Admiral West released from the adjoining room.

"Well, well," said West. "Jim Kirk! You are the last person I expected to see here. Did you and that big ship of yours get lost and wander into hostile territory?"

"Not quite, sir," grinned Kirk. "I take it you are unharmed?" West nodded. "And you still have..."

"Yes, those have not been discovered, Jim, you can rest easy."

Kirk turned to Scotty. "Take a quick look around, make sure there are no other Havers. We'll meet you at the shuttlecraft." Scotty slipped out the door. Kirk turned his attention back to West and McCoy who were busy tying the aliens. McCoy stood up to survey his handiwork. "It'll be good to get back to the *Enterprise*, Captain," he said. "How do you think Spock's doing?"

"Knowing Spock, Bones, he has things under control."



But Spock didn't have things at all under control. The *Enterprise* had approached Haver cautiously, knowing that they were expected. They were met by a show of force which the ship handled without too much difficulty. But, as they started to retreat, they were ambushed by three large warships and only the *Enterprise's* superior speed and weaponry had kept the fight even.

The *Enterprise* was gradually forcing the other ships back. Taking advantage of the situation, Spock ordered Chekov to plot a course back to the satellite bodies. "I think we have spent enough time as a diversion. Mr. Sulu, I want some distance between us and the Haver warships. Implement warp 5."

As Sulu moved to obey, there was a blinding flash and everyone on the bridge was flung off their seat. The ship heaved with the strain of righting herself from the combined phaser blasts of the enemy warships.

Spock shook his head. His vision was blurred, the result of a sharp connection with the bridge railing. Running his hand across his forehead, he saw it was covered with blood. Cautiously, he rose and looked around. All personnel were returning to their stations except for Chekov, who was lying motionless beside the navigation console. Sulu was fighting to get the *Enterprise* under control. Spock hit the communicator on the command chair. "Sickbay, send a team to the bridge immediately." He quickly checked the navigator. Satisfied there was nothing he could do, he attempted to contact engineering but there was no response. "Lt. Harmon, get down to engineering - find out what is going on."

Harmon limped hurriedly into the turbolift, a nasty gash showing through a tear in his trousers which he didn't

notice in his concern to find out what happened.

"Mr. Spock," said Sulu, "I can't hold her. Something has happened to the controls - and the Havers are coming at us again. We can't take another combined blow like the last one. Our shields are completely down on the star-board side."

Spock slipped into Chekov's seat and checked the photon torpedoes - the system seemed undamaged. Sulu counted down the seconds as the distance between the Havers and the *Enterprise* narrowed. He glanced at Spock, his normally cheerful face drawn with worry. The Vulcan had his eyes glued on the viewing screen, his slender fingers poised - then they moved and the ship shuddered as the torpedoes departed. A blinding glare flashed on the screen. As it cleared, two of the Haver warships were stopped in space, one listing badly. The third had disappeared.

The medical team arrived on the bridge. Dr. M'Benga treated Spock's head wound as the report came in on the almost total destruction of the engineering section. Seconds later, Lt. Harmon made his eyewitness report from the site of the disaster.

"It's a mess, sir. Half the panels are burned out. Impulse engines are completely destroyed. We have warp drive, but instrumentation shows that the power flow is uneven. I don't know how long it will take to repair."

"Can we get enough power to navigate?"

"We'll do our best, sir. Harmon out."

"Chekov has a concussion, Mr. Spock, but no other serious injury. Just a matter of time now."

Spock nodded, his mind already miles away. They were stuck in space, time length unknown to repair engines. Jim Kirk and the others should be leaving Havershamgt. The *Enterprise* was going to be late for the rendezvous. If a Haver warship should intercept the shuttlecraft, the landing party had little hope of survival. Spock decided to go to engineering to see exactly what was going on.

As he walked through the corridors, repairs were in full swing. Most sections were in operational readiness, but he discovered that reports concerning the engineering section had not been exaggerated. He listened without comment to Lt. Harmon's assessment of the needed repairs. Scotty's assistant knew his job well, and the Vulcan saw there was nothing he could do to help. If he would admit to the feeling, he was frustrated when he left engineering. He could only imagine what was happening to the landing party - he had no idea if they were successful in rescuing Admiral West, and no one knew when the *Enterprise* would be capable of returning to the satellite.



As West and McCoy finished securing the Havers, Kirk walked over to the door, ready to go out and join Scotty. As he opened it, the room exploded in action. He was driven back to the far wall by two men, the taller one wielding a stout club. He hit Kirk viciously across his side, across the ribs that had only just begun to knit together. Kirk staggered forward, only to get hit again, and dropped to the floor with a quiet moan. West and McCoy had leaped forward instantly, only to be felled by a phaser blast.



McCoy was hazily aware of being shaken. He tried to open his eyes and was surprised that he could. After a second, the room came into focus. Then he staggered to his feet. It was Scotty who was doing the shaking.

"You all right, Scotty?"

"Aye, Doctor. No permanent damage."

McCoy turned to Kirk who was lying, unconscious, on the floor. Picking up his medical kit, he quickly ran the scanner over Kirk's prone form. Scotty saw the frown and wisely asked no questions.

"Help me raise him up, Scotty," said McCoy.

"How is he?"

"Not good. He had three broken ribs. Those were reinjured, and two more along with them. Some internal bleeding - why he hasn't punctured a lung is beyond me. He's got to stay absolutely still until we can get him back to the *Enterprise*." As he spoke, he taped Kirk's ribs as tightly as he dared.

There was a quiet cough from the door. Looking up, McCoy and Scotty saw the commanding officer of the Havers. He was very tall with long black hair pulled back from his face. His complexion was a light purple and narrow yellow eyes gazed expressionlessly at Kirk lying on the floor. Lifting his eyes, he looked around the room. The vacant expression on his face made McCoy shudder.

"Your captain, he is not well?"

"No, he's not," snapped McCoy. "He needs medical treatment immediately."

Kirk stirred and opened his eyes. The Haver commander looked at him coldly and continued, "I came to tell you that we have removed Admiral West to a better location. Oh, yes," he said as an afterthought, "your shuttlecraft has been disabled, and, by now, your starship has been destroyed..."

"No, not the *Enterprise*..."

"Jim, don't get up!" But McCoy was too late. Kirk staggered to his feet and was hit immediately by a phaser blast and crumpled to the floor. McCoy was brought up short by the same phaser.

"You are staying here," continued the Haver commander as though nothing had happened. "There is no heat, no food - no way to get off the planetoid. You will die, slowly, painfully. Maybe it will teach the Federation to stay out of Haver territory."



The hours dragged by. The three men huddled on the floor, trying to keep warm. McCoy had checked Kirk and found that his fall had caused one of the broken ribs to press against his left lung. The irritation was causing the lung to fill with fluid. Kirk drifted in and out of consciousness. They tried to make him comfortable but there was little they could do. McCoy debated with himself on the risks of performing surgery where they were. He didn't have the required equipment, no sterile conditions, no blood for transfusions if they were necessary - but he knew he might have no choice.

Scotty got up and started walking in a vain attempt to get warm. Kirk moved restlessly.

"He's worse, isn't he, Doctor. Can't you do anything?"

All McCoy's pent-up worry let loose. "If you think you're so smart, why don't you try opening his chest in this filthy place - let in all sorts of infection. Sure, I could set his ribs and almost surely kill him in the process. Is that what you want?"

Scotty went a dull red but didn't answer. McCoy was immediately sorry for his outburst. "Scotty, I..."

"Forget it, Doctor. I had no right to say anything. I know you're doing everything you can."

McCoy walked over to the window, his frustration visible in his movements. "He's developing pneumonia, Scotty. I'll probably have to drain that lung. That might give us a little more time." He hit his fist against the window frame, debating on the best course of action.

As he hit the frame, Scotty saw the wood around the window give slightly. Grabbing the table, the only article of furniture in the room, he smashed it against the wall. McCoy stared at him in amazement.

"Doctor," said Scotty, "I think you have just shown us the way out." He took the stout table leg and blow after blow hit the window frame. For a few minutes, nothing happened, then there was a loud crash and Scotty hit it with all his strength and his momentum sent both of his arms straight through the sharp edges.

McCoy was in immediate action. "Quick, Scotty," he ordered, seeing the severed artery. "Clamp this on your arm." He worked quickly, but had a bit of trouble keeping up with the blood flow. However, ten minutes later he finished sealing the last wound.

Scotty looked ruefully at his arms. "So much for my contribution," he said.

"No permanent damage, Scotty," said McCoy, "and it got us out of here." He cleared the rest of the debris out of the broken window. "Stay with the captain," he said as he boosted himself through the opening. "Don't let him move around. I'm going to see what is going on."

There was no sign of the Havers and none of the other buildings seemed to contain anything useful. McCoy ran to the shuttlecraft - if it wasn't entirely destroyed, he could get the survival kits. At least that would keep them going for a while. As he clambered over the last of the boulders, he stopped in his tracks. There were people gathered at the shuttlecraft and those people were dressed in Starfleet uniforms. McCoy gave a yell and thundered down to the group.

"You certainly took your sweet time to look in on us, Spock. We need the *Enterprise* badly." Seeing Spock's rising eyebrows, he continued, "West was here; we lost him. Jim's hurt. It's serious..."

Spock grabbed McCoy hard by the arm, making the doctor wince. "The captain - how..."

"He was badly beaten by the Havers, Spock. Broken ribs, internal bleeding, and he's developing pneumonia. I've been able to keep him comfortable, but he's slipping. I've got to get him to Sickbay!"

Spock turned to the security guard standing beside him. "Have you been able to contact the ship?" The young ensign shook his head. Spock looked at McCoy. "They must have run into some problem to take them out of orbit." McCoy frowned.

"Well, we'd better get back to the captain and Scotty. He ducked into the shuttlecraft and came out with one of the survival kits. If they couldn't get Kirk back to the *Enterprise* immediately, at least he could keep him warm.

On their return, a phaser took care of the locked doors. Although Spock had been warned about the captain's condition, it took all his Vulcan control to keep his expression impassive. Kirk was very pale, his face and hair drenched with sweat and his breathing extremely laboured. But he was conscious.

"Spock..." A painful spasm of coughing followed the word.

"Jim, don't talk - we're taking you back to the *Enterprise*..." A warning shout from the other room sent Spock

and McCoy running out into a melee of Havers and *Enterprise* personnel. McCoy was flung to the floor. Spock put up a tremendous struggle but was overpowered. As McCoy was hauled to his feet and shoved over to where the landing party had been herded, he saw the Haver commander being helped up.

"I had heard of the strength of the Vulcans," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Up until now, I had not experienced it personally. My compliments, sir. You are a worthy adversary."

Spock said nothing. After sizing him up, the Haver turned his expressionless eyes on the others. "So, once again we have the Federation. My information appears correct - you did destroy our ships. Your starship is obviously as dangerous a fighting vessel as it is reputed to be, but we failed to see any sign of it as we approached the planet..." Turning quickly, he struck Spock across the face. "Where is it, Vulcan?"

Spock stood silently, a trickle of green running from his mouth. "No, I didn't think you would give me an answer. But I know a way of getting you to talk." As he spoke, he walked over to the door that McCoy had closed behind him as he entered the room. He flung it open, his weapon at the ready. The room was empty!

"What happened to the captain?" Spock and McCoy exchanged glances - Kirk's physical condition would not permit him to go far.

"It is of little matter," continued the Haver. "We found an interesting item when we searched Admiral West a short while ago - certain defense plans. When I get those back to Haver, they should make interesting reading. We..."

A loud explosion interrupted him and he motioned his men outside to investigate, leaving himself and a lieutenant to cover the *Enterprise* crewmen. Then there was a shout and the sound of running feet, another blast, and total silence.

The Havers looked uneasily at each other. "Lieutenant, go and see what has happened."

The man departed and the minutes dragged past. There was no sound from anyone in the room. Many escape plans passed through the minds of the *Enterprise* personnel, but Spock was covered by the phaser in the Haver's hand and it never wavered. Clearly, if any of them moved, it would cost Spock his life. Then footsteps were heard mounting the steps to the building. The door opened slowly, forcing everyone in the room to focus his undivided attention on it.

"No, it can't be..." The sentence broke off as a phaser blast hit the Haver full force. He crumpled where he had been standing at Spock's feet, but the Vulcan was no longer there. Three quick strides brought him to the door where he caught Jim Kirk as he also lost consciousness, and gently lowered him to the floor.

"Quickly, Doctor," he ordered, but McCoy needed no urging. Grabbing his medical kit from the other room, he was running to the captain when suddenly there seemed to be people everywhere.

"It looks like the cavalry just arrived," grinned Scotty as he watched a large contingent of *Enterprise* personnel pound across the compound. As Sulu ran up, Spock got to his feet.

"Mr. Sulu, have the captain and Dr. McCoy beamed aboard immediately - medical emergency. Mr. Scott, go with them. Security team, come with me. Mr. Bolton, stay here and keep an eye on this prisoner."

The hum of the transporter was sounding as Spock headed across the compound. A quick check of the area showed the results of the fight. The other side had fared very badly.

"You seem to have arrived in time, Mr. Sulu," said Spock. "We certainly needed the help."

"But we had only just beamed down when we met you at the compound, sir. Whatever happened here happened with no help from us."

Spock stared at him. If the landing party hadn't ambushed the aliens, then there was only one other answer - but that wasn't possible - not in the condition he was in!



The *Enterprise* was on its way to Starfleet Headquarters. Mr. Scott was shaken when he saw the condition of his engines, but under his expert guidance, Mr. Harmon and his crew were getting the warp drive stabilized. Chekov had been released from Sickbay suffering from a slight headache, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

Spock and McCoy were sitting in the Sickbay, the latter totally exhausted. In the past hour he had almost lost Kirk twice - only the captain's stubborn resistance got him through the operation.

Sulu arrived, accompanied by a tall figure. Spock rose to his feet - McCoy was too tired to try.

"Admiral West," said Spock. "You are looking well, sir."

"Yes, thanks to the quick action of the lieutenant here. Doctor, how's Kirk? Would it be possible to see him?"

"He's alive, Admiral. You can see him, but only for a few minutes. He's not very strong."

The five of them moved to the next room. Kirk was lying motionless, his chest heavily bandaged. Sensing their arrival, he opened his eyes.

"Hello, Jim," said West. "Excuse me for saying so, but you look even worse than the last time I saw you. What's he been doing, Doctor, staying up too late at night?"

"No, ignoring my advice to take a rest leave."

"Cut it out, both of you," said Kirk. "Be serious. No one will tell me what's been happening."

"I could say the same about you," replied West. "Lt. Sulu said you made a one man assault on the Havers and probably should have died in the trying as you were rather battered before you started."

"Never mind that. What happened?"

"The Haver ship has been destroyed, Captain," replied Sulu. "We were orbiting the planetoid, having traced the shuttlecraft's locational beam back there. Mr. Spock had beamed down with the landing party when our sensors showed the presence of a Haver warship and it was beaming something down to the surface. On a hunch, I had the sensors check out the possibility of Admiral West being aboard. Life readings for one human registered, so we beamed him aboard..."

"You stole him right out of the Haver warship?" said Kirk in surprise.

"Yes, sir," grinned Sulu. "Then we challenged the Havers. There was no verbal response, but they did fire. Uh...we had damaged shielding so were forced to fire back. We must have hit their nuclear pile - she blew up with the first phaser hit."

"And, fortunately, the defense plans were blown up with them," added West, "so that is no worry now." Noticing Kirk's attempts to find a comfortable position, he went on. "How do you feel, Jim - and be honest."

Kirk seiled. "I think I'll live."

"Live!" sputtered McCoy. "You have five broken ribs and a punctured lung, thanks to your fool heroics! Do you have any idea how dangerous a stunt you pulled down there?"

"Bones, I had to do it. They had you at somewhat of a disadvantage. I peeked through the door after you left, and saw Spock with that phaser pointed at him. I was afraid he would do something foolish." He seiled fondly at his first officer. "So," he continued, "I got your hypo spray, injected what I hoped was a proper amount of Rzhat, which I remembered you saying was the best pain killer you had ever run across, and left through the window. It was a simple process to set some explosives I found and get your captors to chase after me." Touching his side gingerly, he said, "Running across the compound was not the easiest thing I have ever done. When the explosion came, I discovered I had miscalculated the strength of the blast and was knocked off my feet. I must have passed out, because the next thing I knew a big Haver was standing over me. I guess he thought I was dead because he bent over me with his phaser within easy reach. I grabbed for it and in the struggle it was fired - fortunately directed at him. It took me a few minutes to get to my feet. I honestly don't remember what happened after that. When I woke up again, I was here."

"And here you're staying," said McCoy firmly. "Cooe on, everybody - out!"

"See you later, Jim," said West. "I know better than to argue with a ship's surgeon." With a cheerful wave, he and Sulu left.

"We should be at Starfleet Headquarters in 14.3 days, Captain," said Spock. "The *Enterprise* is still only capable of warp one..."

"Yes," interrupted McCoy, laughing, "and I don't know who hurts more, Scotty or his engines."

"Doctor," said Spock, "that is a completely illogical statement. Engines cannot feel pain."

Kirk started to laugh, but was brought up short by a gasp of pain.

"Well," said McCoy, "you must be feeling better if you can laugh at an idiotic statement from your first officer."

"Doctor," said Spock icily, "I fail to see how you can find a logical statement idiotic."

Kirk sank down into the pillows and closed his eyes. He didn't think he could stand another argument between the perennial combatants.

McCoy felt Kirk's pulse, then looked at the readings on the panel above the bed. Nodding to himself, he turned to the Vulcan standing beside him.

"Cooe on, Spock. I've got some Saurian brandy in my office and I think we could both use some. Jim's already asleep and, I don't know about you, but my nerves are shot. We almost lost him back there."

"And now, Doctor?"

"Now?" Looking at Kirk, he answered in a slightly shakey voice. "It will take time but he's got all the time in the world. He'll be all right."

Kirk heard a quietly released breath from the Vulcan and felt a warm hand gently brush a stray strand of hair from his face.

"Doctor, I believe I shall join you for a brandy. As you said, recent events have been trying."

As Spock and McCoy walked side by side out of the room, the ghost of a smile crossed Kirk's face. The touch of a hand and the tone of a voice had done more for him than could any medicine - and the knowledge of a friendship from two men that was too deep ever to be expressed. Darkness settled in; a soothing quiet oblivion; a healing sleep.



Running Up & Down on Green Grass

James Kirk let his gaze rove around the rec room trying hard to keep his growing sense of amusement from showing on his face. The attention of all present was gradually focusing on the normally quiet First Officer who was definitely out of character at the moment, holding an animated practically one-sided conversation with the chief engineer. Scotty, holding his usual glass with refills handy at his elbow, was doing his level best to keep up with what Spock was telling him. McCoy had come in almost unnoticed and stood for several moments looking at Spock in mild astonishment. Then he caught Kirk's eye and moved over to where the Captain was sitting, pulling a chair around to a position where he could keep the Vulcan under observation.

"What brought that on, Jim? We haven't been on any wierd planets, no disturbances in our area of space since we made it back from that wild ride to Old Earth. Could this possibly be the beginning of some Vulcan cycle I don't know anything about?"

Kirk chuckled. "You only left out one thing, Bones..."

"Let me guess - uh, something on the ship?"

"Uh huh."

"Let's see, where does Spock spend most of his time. Duty station - can't see how that would cause excitement in the rec room. What else..." He hesitated, frowning a little as he pictured Spock in his off duty hours. His face lit up in a grin. "Computers!"

"Very good, Bones, you're a better detective than you let on. Computers it is. We received orders earlier today to head for Starbase II. We can finally get rid of those amorous computer circuits that have been plaguing us since Cygnet XIV. The new system that they have been testing for the past few years is now ready to be put into all the starships. The *Excalibur* is almost finished - the *Enterprise* is scheduled next. It'll take a couple of weeks to get the new equipment in and the computers reprogramed, then possibly a month of testing to make sure it doesn't backfire anywhere..."

"Heaven forbid if we have to go through that amorous phase again - those computers in Sickbay were downright embarrassing with some of their suggestions."

Kirk laughed. "I think these are immune to that sort of thing. Anyway, Spock hasn't stopped talking about the new system since the order came through. He already probably knows more about them than the programmers. I don't think I've ever seen him more excited."

"Excited," said McCoy with a chuckle, "rather out of character but nice to see. The Human Spock needs release every now and then no matter which route he says he had consciously chosen to follow..." He looked around at the people staring at the Vulcan, "I give him about another 30 seconds to notice that he has become the center of attention..."

McCoy wasn't far off. Spock glanced up at one point and a deathly silence fell over the room as he saw all eyes on him. He visibly drew back into his shell. His sudden silence did not seem to affect Scotty who reached out for the bottle at his elbow.

"I like the idea, Mr. Spock. As it stands now there are times when it takes too long to activate the emergency warp. This new computer system sounds like just the job." He poured himself another generous helping of the amber liquid. "To progress..." He held up his glass for a moment, then downed it.

As he spoke, the conversation gradually picked up around the room. Kirk could not tell if Scotty's action had been deliberate or accidental but it had taken Spock out of the limelight for which he felt a stir of gratitude. Kirk knew how uncomfortable the Vulcan felt standing out in a crowd.

The room gradually emptied. It was the end of another dull day of warping through space. It would be almost a

week before they got to Starbase II, and the daily routine quickly became boring.

Scotty nursed his drink as he talked a while longer to Spock, then he called a cheery good night and disappeared out the door, bottle tucked under his arm. Kirk smiled tolerantly - there were few men better in the Fleet than his chief engineer - and few who could match him drink for drink. He had seen a lot try - and fail.

"Come join us, Mr. Spock," said McCoy. "I won't bite. But please spare me from the new computers - I couldn't understand it anyway."

"That's hardly surprising, Doctor," said Spock in a mild voice as he moved over to join Kirk and McCoy. "There was a tape in your office which I took the trouble to peruse the other day. It seemed to focus on a boy named Dick, a girl named Jane and a dog called Spot. The plot of the story seemed to be the capturing of a blue ball..." Spock's eyes caught those of Jim Kirk and a conspiring gleam passed between them.

"Now wait just a minute!" blustered McCoy. "That was a twentieth century reader - for primary grade students..."

"Well, Doctor, if you find that reading to your pleasure, be it far above me to suggest more suitable literature..."

"Jim," said McCoy in an aggrieved voice, "are you just going to sit there and let him accuse me of reading 'Dick and Jane'?"

Kirk couldn't hold his laughter causing McCoy to pout. "Well, I can see I'm not appreciated here..." and stomped out in mock anger.

"Spock, you really shouldn't pick on him so much," said Kirk, still chuckling. "Still, I can't believe he'd be reading 'Dick and Jane'..."

"I believe Nurse Chapel put it there, Captain. She and Lt. Uhura had been discussing the retraining program that Miss Uhura had been put on after our encounter with Nomad. She could not believe that she had had trouble reading anything as simple so they got the tape out. I happened by just as Dr. McCoy had been invited to read about the blue ball..."

"Spare me," said Kirk. "I can only imagine too well what happened from there." His eyes fondly held those of his First Officer. Spock had a sense of humor as keen as any human Kirk had ever met. It rarely surfaced, but when it did, it was always subtle and piercing - and almost always at McCoy's expense.

"Spock, do you have any plans for the two weeks we'll be free while they reprogram the computers?"

"Negative, Captain. I had not given the subject much thought. I have been somewhat engrossed with my study of the new system..."

"Yes, I've noticed. Well, I've given it some thought and have decided that you and I should get away for awhile..."

"Set away, Jim? I don't understand..."

"I've been doing some computations of my own. It's been almost nine months since either of us has had any real break from this ship. I mean really away, where no one can find us - away from the responsibilities, away from Starfleet..." he grinned a little "...and after that collision with the black star and the mess with Captain Christopher and his friend I think..."

"Jim, I don't..."

"Yes, I know, you don't need a vacation, you thrive on the constant struggles of life. Well, my friend, I don't. Every now and then my human nature gets the best of me and wants out - and have I got a great out!"

Spock only looked confused at Kirk's use of an unfamiliar term. Kirk smiled and continued. "I thought we'd go camping, Spock, out in the backwoods - just the two of us. How about it?"

Spock looked down at his hands, not too sure how to answer. He felt no urge to leave the ship, indeed, he had been looking forward to assisting with the reprogramming of the computers. Then he glanced up to see the hopeful look in Kirk's eyes and he made an instant decision.

"I would be pleased to accompany you, Jim." As Kirk's eyes lit up, Spock knew he had made the right decision. Suddenly, it was unimportant to him how long it would take to reprogram the computers. Kirk badly needed a vacation and if he wanted his First Officer to go with him, Spock would go willingly.

"Great, I'll send a message ahead so everything will be ready when we get there." He looked so impish as he got up that Spock momentarily wondered what he had let himself in for. However, he had learned that he could normally give as much as he took and found himself looking forward to his Captain's teasing challenge.



"There they are, Mr. Kirk, just as you ordered. I've stacked all your provisions in that shed over there - everything you asked for."

Spock stood beside Kirk eyeing with slight distaste a rather rangy buckskin gelding who was staring back in a

somewhat similar fashion. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kirk glance at him, a grin spreading over his face as he took in Spock's expression. The Vulcan quickly put on his best neutral look.

"Here's your map of the camping sites," the stable owner continued, "you'll see marked the best places to fish and what plant life is edible...Guess that's it. You've got two good horses there - Charlie, that's the chestnut, can be a little headstrong - has a bit of a temper, like all redheads. Ramble, the buckskin, is an insurance policy on legs. The two pack mules are pretty dependable, but can be stubborn when the mood moves them."

Spock eyed Kirk as this information was given, and Kirk knew what the Vulcan was thinking. He quickly broke in.

"Uh...thanks Mr. Stone. They sound more than suitable. We'll pick up some things and be back about noon to get the horses."

The silence lengthened as the two men walked from the stable to the large store down the street. Kirk glanced sideways at Spock, but there was nothing in the Vulcan's expression which even hinted at what he thought of how they were going to spend the next two weeks.

They walked into the store, somewhat conspicuous in their Starfleet uniforms among the locals. But that lasted only a few minutes. Soon they were paying for jeans, shirts, boots, hats and leather chaps. Spock had still said nothing. Kirk started to feel a little uneasy, suddenly wondering if it really was fair to drag Spock off on one of his wild whims. He very much doubted if Spock would ever be moved to go on a camping trip on his own initiative.

"Spock," he began tentatively.

"Yes, Captain?" Polite, non-committal.

"You all right?"

Spock's eyebrow lifted. He knew his silence would eventually get to Kirk and make the human worry about what he had got the Vulcan into. But enough was enough. "Affirmative, Captain, only these pants seem to have a tensile cohesion lacking in the comparable garment issued by Starfleet."

Kirk couldn't help laughing which was exactly what Spock had intended. "I agree, they sure are stiff - but you've never lived until you've broken in a pair of jeans, Spock. They become a part of you, fit you like a glove, move when you move. Gosh, I can remember a pair I had when I was..."

He broke off seeing the puzzled look on Spock's face. Obviously, he had never worn jeans as a kid. "Never mind, just let me know in six months how you feel about them."

"Six months?"

"Takes that long, Spock, unless you sit for some hours in the bathtub with them on..."

Both Spock's eyebrows were on the rise. "Come on," said Kirk. "Let's go back for the horses and get going."

Kirk was an old hand and packed his mule quickly. He already had his horse tacked by the time Mr. Stone had finished showing Spock how to balance the load on either side of his pack mule, Jeffrey. Kirk led the buckskin gelding over already bridled and showed Spock how to cinch up the modified western saddle they had been provided with. Kirk sensed Spock watching very closely and knew that after today the Vulcan would not have to ask for help - that intricate brain had stored all the necessary information for future use.

Kirk handed Ramble's reins to Spock and went to get his horse, Charlie, and his pack mule, Sidney. He swung into the saddle as he had so often done as a youth, the easy feeling of familiarity making it seem as though it had only been a matter of days, rather than years since he had last ridden. Spock looked dubiously at Ramble patiently waiting. He had been on a horse a few times out of sheer necessity and had not found the experience to be particularly pleasant. Heaving a silent mental sigh, he put his foot in the stirrup and swung aboard in a somewhat ungainly version of what he had observed Kirk doing. Kirk stifled a smile - no use discouraging his friend before they got started. He showed Spock how to coil the lead rope from Jeffrey's halter so that he could gather it up easily or let it play out when necessary. He did the same with Sidney then, clamping his hat firmly down on his head and throwing a grin to Spock, he led the way out of the stable yard and off down the dusty street. Again Spock heaved a sigh, shifted his seat to a more comfortable position, experimentally kicked his heels against Ramble's side and moved off after him.

A couple of hours later Kirk called a halt. He could feel his muscles starting to complain and knew Spock was probably feeling the same discomfort, although he would deny it. They had been riding through a large wood for the past half hour. It had an almost park-like appearance - the native gandy trees, which closely resembled Earth's maple, never shed its leaves, allowing the native grasses to grow thick and luxuriant under their boughs. As he waited for Spock to catch up, Kirk consulted his map. A brief distance further there was a large stream and suitable camping areas.

"There's a good spot for a camp just ahead, Spock. I think we've gone far enough for today. Besides, I want to just sit around and do a little old-fashioned fishing."

Within minutes they arrived at the stream. The rushing waters were trapped in several places in deep, calm

pools, the crystal waters clearly showing everything that moved. They dismounted and untacked their horses and pack mules, carefully stacking the provisions into a natural hollow in a nearby rock. They watered the animals, then tethered them on a long line which gave them plenty of room to graze.

Spock took off his chaps and sat down in the deep grass and took off his boots. He still found his new clothes somewhat uncomfortable, being used to the robes of Vulcan and the standard uniform dress of Starfleet. He wiggled his toes, savouring the freedom of movement. He watched Kirk as the Captain sorted out the camping equipment. He shook out the two-man tent, looking dubiously at the attachments which hung at all corners. He'd never been all that good at putting up this type of old-fashioned shelter.

Spock stood up, leaving his boots behind and took the tent from Kirk. He had never put up such a structure, but his logical mind easily assessed the only conceivable way it could be erected. They worked easily together and the tent was up in minutes.

"Spock, I'll put the fishing pole together - you gather some firewood. I can smell the fish frying already..." He grinned at Spock's bemused expression. He knew the Vulcan would not join in his feast, but Spock wasn't going to spoil his treat by making any disparaging comment. He only had to go a little distance to find an old tree that was fairly rotten and collected all the wood they would need. He also gathered a fair amount of tannu - a tubular-like vegetable which grew in large amounts on this planet and were considered a delicacy. Spock was very fond of them and looked forward to their dinner.

When he got back, Kirk was perched on a large rock in the middle of the stream. He waved cheerfully, then leaned back with his pole balanced between his knees, his hands behind his head. Spock sailed inwardly. Kirk needed to relax like this - it was seldom that either of them were this free of responsibility. He stood watching his friend for a few minutes, then turned and started to build the fire.

Kirk lay looking at the bright blue sky, letting his thoughts drift. He remembered other camping trips, old friends, his family. He turned his head and watched as Spock busied himself at the camp. "I've had a lot of friends over the years," he thought to himself, "but I never knew the meaning of the word until I met him. I'll never forget the first day I met him, dreading having to work with a cold, logical computer. How wrong I was..."

His thoughts were interrupted by a tug at the end of his line. He made a grab for the rod as it disappeared out from between his knees, almost following it into the water. He managed to grab the end just before it disappeared. Whatever was on the other end certainly wasn't just a little minnow. He braced himself against the rock and settled in for the duration. His wait wasn't in vain. Ten minutes later he landed a large mpira, a fish similar to Earth's rainbow trout.

"Spock," he yelled, holding his prize high in triumph. "Look..." As Spock looked up he saw not only the fish, but his Captain toppling backwards into the rushing waters. Kirk had stepped back but there was nothing there and he and his fish disappeared into the foaming water. Spock dashed forward not exactly sure what he was going to do because he couldn't see Kirk anywhere.

"Jim," he called anxiously. Nothing. No response and no sign of Kirk. Spock jumped into the stream where he had seen the Captain disappear. The force of the water made it difficult to keep his feet but he kept groping.

"Lose something, Mr. Spock?" The familiar, teasing voice made Spock whirl around, almost losing his balance in the process. Kirk was standing on the bank behind him, dripping wet but still with the fish clutched firmly in his grasp.

"Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk had the decency to look a little embarrassed. "Yes, I landed in one of the pools a bit further down. Thought it would be easier to get back by dry land - didn't mean for you to follow my example."

Spock waded out, his jeans soaking wet, but thankful he didn't have his boots on. He looked down at his saturated pants. Kirk clapped him on his shoulder.

"Remember what I said about soaking your jeans, Spock? Leave them on - let them dry - they'll feel better."

Spock wasn't particularly thrilled with the thought of squelching around for several hours, but anything would be better than the stiffness that he had been putting up with all day.

They prepared their meals in silence, Kirk being torn between mirth and sympathy for Spock who was stoically peeling and dicing his tannues preparing them for the soup-like substance of the finished dish. Kirk cleaned and filetted his fish and put it into a pan to fry, the smell quickly filling the air. He could hardly wait...



Spock stood up, reaching for Kirk's empty plate. "I'll wash up, Captain." Kirk was too content to argue and handed his plate to the Vulcan. He dug out a book from his pack and settled back to read. Spock finished his cleaning chores and went to check the horses. They were still contentedly grazing. Jeffrey and Sidney had sacked out, only bothering to wiggle their long ears as he spoke to them. He went back to where Kirk was sitting.

The sun gradually set, the fiery colors staying bright in the western sky for a long time. Kirk had given up reading and was lost in the glory of the sunset. Spock noted the gradual oncoming of dusk as a fact of nature but, unlike Kirk, was not lost in the beauty. His nature analyzed the whys and hows of the changing colors, but his attention was more on the human sitting so close beside him.

He had known Kirk now for a number of years - had seen him in every conceivable situation, in every possible mood and yet Jim Kirk kept showing him sides of human nature that Spock had known nothing about. Here was a captain, Starship rank, a man with power and authority, lost in the beauty of a sunset. Spock remembered McCoy once saying that Kirk was a romantic - maybe he was right. There were many subtle degrees to Kirk's nature that never ceased to surprise the Vulcan. He had been taught to deal with life in one manner only - by logic. He had seen Kirk deal with situations in a dozen different ways, never reacting the same way twice yet rarely was he wrong when he used that sense he called intuition. Spock had yet to figure out what Kirk meant by hunches, but he could not argue with the results they produced.

Kirk yawned, then looked at Spock and a slight smile touched his face. He seemed to know what Spock was thinking.

"Come on, Spock, let's water the horses, then turn in." Kirk took the horses and Spock let the mules. They went a little downstream where the water flowed more gently and let the animals drink their fill. Sidney went one step further and rolled in the water. Spock dropped the rope and got out of the way. He had been wet enough for one day! He waited until the mule was finished with his impromptu bath and waded ashore before he made any attempt to catch him. He led them both back to the tether line where Kirk was busy brushing off Charlie. He threw the brush over to Spock and chuckled.

"I see Sidney took care of his own grooming." As Spock brushed off Ramble and Jeffrey, Kirk picked out their feet. They were all unshod, the terrain they worked on being easy on their feet making shoes unnecessary. After Jeffrey had stood on Spock's foot twice while he was being groomed, Spock was thankful he wasn't shod. The bare foot was painful enough. He stoically put up with Jeffrey's antics, not wanting to arouse Kirk's suspicions - he didn't want any teasing. So far Kirk had held his tongue, but Spock knew with certainty that his greenness was going to be open season in a few days.

Finished with the horses they went back to camp and got things ready for the night. Spock buried the fire as Kirk spread out the sleeping bags. Spock checked the tent, making sure he had put it up correctly. The last thing he wanted was to have it collapse - he'd never hear the end of it.

Kirk slipped into his sleeping bag. He was tired and felt it. Just being on the *Enterprise* kept him under a certain degree of tension, even during the boring days. The responsibility of command was always nudging at his shoulder, just to let him know it was there. It was always like this the first couple of days of leave. He would fold early, all the tension slipping away leaving him momentarily exhausted. Within minutes he was asleep.

Spock stayed awake a while longer. He thought about meditating but then just let himself relax and listen to the night sounds of the forest, the occasional stomping from one of the horses intermingling with the other noises. He didn't notice when he let sleep overtake him.



By the time Kirk appeared from the tent Spock had coffee bubbling over the fire, had watered the horses and mules and was beginning to fill the packs that Jeffrey and Sidney carried.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I don't usually oversleep this much."

An expression as close to a smile as Spock normally ever got crossed the Vulcan's face. "You needed it, Jim. We're not in any hurry to go anywhere."

Kirk smiled in agreement and sat down beside the fire, pouring himself a cup of coffee. He swallowed some and felt his hair start to rise. Whew, it was strong! He kept his face composed, not wanting to hurt Spock's feelings. The Vulcan rarely drank coffee - probably liked it that strong those few times he did indulge. Kirk decided discretion was the better part of valor. "Think I'll shave." He picked up his shaving kit and his coffee mug and headed off to the stream. There he diluted the coffee until it was more to his taste, then washed and shaved. By the time he got back Spock had dismantled the tent and packed it and the sleeping bags aboard Sidney.

They tacked up and within minutes were on their way, Kirk once again in the lead and Spock plodding along in the rear. Their journey took them gradually out of the woods into a section of open rolling meadows. Wild flowers grew in profusion and small animals were everywhere, some scuttling out of their way, others standing in open defiance waving their tiny paws and uttering what could only be open challenge to the much larger horses who were invading their territory. Side by side the friends rode along, idly chatting about the country they were passing through, laughing at some of the incidents that had happened aboard the *Enterprise*, or just sharing a comfortable silence.

Spock heard Jeffrey cough and turned to check on him and stared in momentary astonishment at the empty halter bumping along behind Kirk's horse where Sidney should have been. Spock pondered momentarily how he should best bring up the subject but could see no way other than just telling him right out.

"Jim, you seem to have misplaced your mule."

The reaction was all Spock could have hoped for. After Kirk stopped sputtering, Spock offered to make lunch while Kirk backtracked and found the wayward Sidney. He dismounted and untacked Ramble, loosening Jeffrey's pack but not taking it off.

Kirk was gone almost half an hour. He found Sidney just at the edge of the woods, curled up in the shade and not in any mood to get on his feet. After some artful cajoling, Kirk finally got him up but had to resign himself to bowing to Sidney's pace. By the time he got back to Spock he was in a foul mood. Spock sensed now was not the time to pursue the subject and handed Kirk one of the sandwiches he had made along with a cup of coffee. He had made it a lot weaker than earlier in the day; Kirk's reaction had not gone unnoticed. Kirk tentatively took a sip, thanking Spock with his eyes over the rim of the cup. He put it down, then sprawled back onto the springy grass. "You know, Spock, I think a man could get to like this kind of life - doing not much of anything..." His voice drifted off as he watched a flock of brilliantly colored birds fly over where they were camped. Spock watched them as well, until they were lost in the horizon. Then he looked over at Kirk. "For how long, Jim?"

Kirk looked up at the sky for a few moments longer, then looked at Spock, his eyes acknowledging that he knew his world was elsewhere, that this would never satisfy him for long.

"However," said Spock, rising to his feet and putting away the things he had used to make lunch, "a few days in this atmosphere are not unpleasant and..." turning as Kirk got to his feet, "...in some cases, necessary."

"As in my case, not yours."

Spock's expression softened. "Not necessarily, Jim." Kirk's eyebrows rose, but Spock didn't go any further, leaving the human wondering what had changed between now and that time when, while they were orbiting the uninhabited planet in the Omicron Delta region, Spock had told him that, for him, vacations were unnecessary.

They mounted up and turned their horses toward the rolling hills that were starting to loom in the distance - their destination for the night. They rode at a fairly brisk pace, Sidney seeming to be trying to make up for being so irritating earlier. They stopped just short of their destination to take a breather when Kirk noticed that Jeffrey was only carrying loose canvas when his packs should have been full.

"Spock, did you forget to tighten your mule's pack before we set off after lunch?"

If the Vulcan's face could have fallen, it would have as he turned to look at the empty packs. Kirk could have sworn that Spock muttered something under his breath as he sat staring at Jeffrey, but when he turned back his face was expressionless.

"Jim, you go ahead and set up camp. I'll take Jeffrey and collect the supplies." His tone left no room for teasing and Kirk looked after him sympathetically as the Vulcan disappeared into the distance. Spock hated doing stupid things. He expected humans to make a mess of almost all situations but was always acutely unhappy if the same happened to him. "Tit for tat," thought Kirk as he swung Charlie around and pushed him on into a trot.

Very shortly he arrived beside the small lake they had decided would be a good place to stay for a few days. The fishing was good, lots of tannu for Spock, good grazing for the animals. Kirk dismounted and untacked Charlie, then pulled the packs off Sidney. Since this was a popular place to camp, there was a large paddock-like field bounded by high hills. It was a sheltered spot, the hills ringing it much like a natural fenceline. It had a stream running through it - a perfect setting for the horses. Kirk turned them loose and Sidney went flying straight into the stream where he wallowed in bliss. Charlie looked at him disdainfully and rolled in the tall grass, his chestnut legs waving in the air. Then they settled down to the serious business of eating.

By the time Spock arrived Kirk had the tent up, sleeping bags ready, had caught two small fish for dinner and collected tannu for Spock. He had also found a good supply of mushrooms and picked enough for both Spock and himself.

Spock wasn't exactly what could be called in a towering rage, but he wasn't far from the Vulcan version of it. Unknown to Kirk, as he had turned to go to the camp, Jeffrey had suddenly decided that he didn't want to leave Sidney. He had firmly planted all four feet and unless Spock let him go the way Sidney had disappeared with Kirk, Jeffrey wouldn't move. Finally, in exasperation, Spock had wound the lead rope around the saddle horn and literally dragged the loudly protesting mule back the way they had come. As they went, Spock discovered that the pack hadn't dropped in one piece, but found bits and pieces of the load all the way back to where he and Kirk had eaten lunch. When he finally had everything firmly tied in and turned to the east where Kirk had set up camp, Jeffrey decided to move. He was still tied to the saddle horn and practically lifted Ramble right off his feet. For the entire trip back to camp Spock had to deal with a bucking, plunging, braying mule. By the time they reached their destination

his nerves were frazzled, to say nothing of both Ramble and Jeffrey.

Kirk took pity on his friend and took Jeffrey. He got his packs off and, with a bit of muscle, managed not to lose him before he got his harness off, then sent him galloping off to Sidney who ignored him completely. Ramble was too tired to want to go anywhere or do anything. Spock led him down to the lake and they both waded in knee deep and Spock gave Ramble a bath. The horse stood with his eyes half closed in bliss, his aching muscles soothed by the cool water washing over him. He had a drink, then Spock turned him out with the others. He only went a few feet before flopping down. Even Charlie's curious nose pushing at him didn't rouse him.

Kirk helped Spock unpack. "Rough trip?" he asked sympathetically.

Spock looked at him for a moment, then a gleam touched his eyes. "Let's just say that Jeffrey can be as head-strong as certain humans I know." Spock saw the challenge had been accepted. Kirk wouldn't hold back now. He found his frustration receding and could almost see the funny side of the afternoon's events, now that they were over.



Dinner had long since ended. Kirk had gone to make sure the horses were securely in their field so he and Spock wouldn't have to chase them over unknown miles the next morning. Spock washed the dishes in the lake. They were both tired after the day's trek and went to bed early.

Kirk drifted on the edge of sleep, quietly chuckling over the incidents of the day. Spock was preparing himself for meditation when a loud 'ping' sounded followed by a louder whistling noise. They both were instantly awake.

"What was that..." Kirk didn't get any further. There were several more loud pings and whistles, then the tent collapsed. Yards and yards of climatized polynylon folded down and buried them.

Spock lay in total silence not quite believing what had happened. Then Kirk started to laugh. He giggled, he whooped, he roared. Spock struggled out of his sleeping bag and pulled at the material enfolding him. He seemed to be getting nowhere fast. From the renewed laughter from Kirk and the humping and bumping at his side of the tent Spock surmised that Kirk was having the same trouble he was.

They finally fought their way free. Kirk was weak from laughter and collapsed in a heap on the grass.

"Spock..." he gasped, "I'm sorry...didn't mean to...didn't mean..." then he broke up again, tears streaming down his face which was bright red from laughter. Spock shook his head. He could see nothing funny in the present situation. He groped around and found his sleeping bag, then Kirk's. He sat down on the grass and waited for Kirk to stop laughing. Finally he got himself under control.

"Spock, I really thought I had it up properly. I watched you so carefully yesterday." He looked ruefully at the tangled mess of material lying at his feet. "I don't think it's much use trying to get it back up tonight."

Spock nodded in silent agreement.

"However," Kirk continued looking up at the sky, "there aren't any clouds. I see no reason why sleeping in the open should cause any problems."

The thunderclaps at dawn told Spock why they shouldn't have slept out in the open. The sky opened and the rains bucketed down. Kirk buried himself deeper into his sleeping bag, seemingly oblivious of the downpour. Spock burrowed miserably into his with the feeling that he had had quite enough of nature and running up and down on green grass.

By the time Kirk poked his nose out, the rain had stopped and the porous soil had absorbed all the water, leaving everything clean and dry. Spock was already up and had sorted out the tangled mess that was their tent. He was in the process of putting it up. Kirk at least had the decency to look shame-faced.

"Good morning, Jim."

"Morning, Spock. I hope you got some sleep last night."

"Affirmative." Spock turned back to his work. Kirk sat and watched. As far as he could tell Spock was doing it in exactly the same way as he had the night before, but he knew Spock's tent would stay put and not repeat the episode of last night.

They stayed at the campsite for the rest of the week. Kirk swam a lot, fished, read and slept. Spock did some exploring, finding some unusual plant specimens which gave him plenty of research to log. He often watched Kirk as he swam but did not join him. They spent long hours talking, arguing, or just enjoying a satisfying silence. Spock had brought along a chess set and many pleasant hours were spent, the games won and lost stayed on an even balance.

Finally they got the itch to move. On a clear, brilliant morning they broke camp and headed to the east. As they jogged through the fields, Spock suddenly realized the jeans he had found so uncomfortable ten days earlier now fit. He had practically lived in them, they had been rained on, waded in, some days were wet more than they were dry. Kirk had told him that they would become like a second skin - Spock hadn't believed him but he couldn't

dispute the results he was experiencing.

Kirk, lost in thought, didn't pay any attention to the vines that hung from the large trees along the wood's edge. Spock looked at them with curiosity - he had not seen formations quite like that before, their intricate twining vines interlacing one with another. He looked ahead at Kirk but was too late to call a warning. The vine was strung across the path and Kirk was looking back at Sidney.

"Jim..." But his voice only echoed with the dull thump as Kirk landed on his backside, Sidney nimbly side-stepping to avoid stepping on him. Ramble came to an abrupt halt - bracing himself as Jeffrey bumped into him from behind. Then he reached his head forward and gently blew down his nose, ruffling Kirk's hair. Spock noted that the sun had turned the Captain's hair almost the same gold color that made up Ramble's buckskin coat. Kirk got to his feet gently rubbing his backside.

"Spock, you could have warned me..."

"I did try, Jim. Are you all right?"

"My pride's bruised, otherwise I'm fine." He collected Charlie who had wandered off the trail just as he saw Sidney getting ready to lie down. He vaulted into the saddle and had grabbed Sidney's rope and jerked him to his feet before Spock could react. He gave Ramble a kick, catching up to Kirk.

"I didn't know you could 'cowboy', I believe is the term, Captain."

Kirk grinned. "I didn't either, Spock, but I couldn't bear the thought of Sidney lying down. It was all I could do to get him back onto his feet last time he managed it."

They were soon out of the woods and started across a sandy stretch of ground, the grass here was more wiry than the lush vegetation surrounding the lake where they had camped. The sun blazed down from a cloudless sky but it wasn't the uncomfortable blazing sun of earth - this sun just made the warmth feel good, making unwary travelers leave themselves open to problems. Kirk brought Charlie to a halt and peeled off his shirt, stuffing it into his saddle bag. Seeing the inquiring look on Spock's face, he chuckled. "I'm on vacation, Spock. When a human goes on vacation he's supposed to come back with a tan. I refuse to be different." Spock inwardly sighed. He would never understand humans and their idiosyncrasies. How could changing the color of one's skin by burning the outer surface to a darker color possibly signify that that person had been away from their normal occupation?

They pitched camp early that day. It would be their last night in the wilderness. Tomorrow they would arrive back where they had started, give back their horses and become Captain and Commander, care and responsibility would again be an integral part of their life. They could no longer afford to be the two loafers they had become the last ten days. Kirk went off to get some fish and tannu for dinner. As he sat on the edge of the stream waiting for a nibble, he found his thoughts straying to the *Enterprise*, her crew, the problems that he was likely to meet when he returned. He smiled to himself. "Two weeks, Jim Kirk, you've left your lady for two weeks and you're worried about her. I'm beginning to believe ships really do have a life of their own. She asks a lot of those privileged to sail her - she asks the most from her Captain..."

He was startled from his reverie by Spock sitting down beside him. He smiled a welcome but then continued to look down the line that disappeared into the water. Spock leaned back against a rock and followed Kirk's gaze. The silence stretched out. Gradually Spock's gaze changed from the water to Kirk. His Captain seemed to be lost in thought - the boyish enthusiasm he had been exhibiting the past week was gone - the young commander had returned. The mantle of responsibility had settled again on his shoulders. Spock sighed to himself. At least Kirk had had this break - he had been worn out, the rest had done him good.

He was interrupted by Kirk pulling in his empty line and getting to his feet. "Spock, I'm starving. I can't wait for some silly fish to come along. Can I share your meal?"

Spock was instantly on his feet. "Of course, Jim. I think you'll like it. I fixed it in a way my father showed me many years ago..."

Kirk looked at him in amusement. "I didn't know Vulcan men cooked."

Spock looked solemn. "Not Vulcan men, Captain, Vulcan warriors. We all learn how to survive - this is only a small part of it."

Kirk sobered. "Of course," he said. They walked side by side back to camp. Kirk silently wrapped up in his own thoughts. Spock knew he would gradually lose the carefree Kirk he had come to know these past days and the Captain he knew better would return. Few people knew Kirk outside his profession - fewer saw him totally relieved of the responsibility of command, saw the open, carefree man - the boy, not the man. Spock knew he revealed little of himself to others. He wondered if Jim Kirk knew he did the same for entirely different reasons.

Spock busied himself with the tannu and other vegetation he had gathered. Kirk unrolled the sleeping bags. The tent was already up. By unspoken mutual consent, Spock had put it up every night since Kirk's disastrous attempt. Every time Kirk watched he was convinced he had put it up exactly the same way as Spock, but he also knew

that if he tried it the tent would surely land on top of them again. He went over and brushed off the horses. He had grown very fond of Charlie and felt a pang of regret when he realized that this would be the last night he would be caring for him. This time tomorrow they would be beaming back aboard the *Enterprise*. Spock's call brought him back to the present. He gave Charlie a pat on the shoulder and went back to the camp.

He couldn't remember when he had tasted anything as good. Spock had skillfully blended the native vegetables with some herbs, making a delicious kind of stew - only this had tannu as a base instead of meat. He had a very large second helping, then pushed his plate away and lay back with a groan.

"McCoy's going to kill me!"

Spock's eyebrow lifted in silent acknowledgment. He knew of McCoy's long battle with Kirk about eating properly. He was either berating Kirk because he wasn't eating enough and was losing weight, or cutting him down to what Kirk disparagingly called 'green leaves' because his weight got one or two pounds above what McCoy considered Kirk's optimum. Spock went through the same routine occasionally, but mostly because McCoy couldn't stand any of the Vulcan dishes that Spock liked. He usually turned a deaf ear to McCoy's barbs which tended to stop the doctor in a hurry.

"I'll wash up."

Kirk was immediately on his feet. "No you don't, Spock. You cooked - I'll wash. Besides, I need a bath. I'll take the plates with me..."

Kirk was gone a long time. When he came back he was empty handed and shamefaced. He had lost all the dishes and spent a long time groping along the stream bed trying to find them but with no success.

"Just as well we get back to civilization tomorrow, Spock. All we've got left now is a coffee pot and nothing to pour it into. Oh well, I'll just start my diet a day early." His irrepressible grin was back. There was no way he could stay down for long.

"Indeed, Jim, I think the synthetic foods of the *Enterprise* are going to be somewhat difficult to face after these past two weeks." Kirk nodded in agreement, the memories of freshly frying fish etched sharply in his brain along with the dinner that Spock had made.

They talked late into the night, the flame of the firelight accenting their features, the fairness of the human, the darkness of the alien. Two friends living as friends in a way they rarely could - savouring these last hours before their life would again catch up and claim them.

Kirk finally drifted off to sleep beside the fire. Spock was loathe to wake him. This was the last peaceful night's sleep his Captain would get for quite some time. He put some more wood on the fire and sat down again. The night sky was clear, the stars shining brilliantly against the black velvet background. The sky momentarily lit up from a shower of meteors, disturbing Kirk's sleep. He moved restlessly for a few moments, then lay still. Spock sat looking at him, struck not for the first time how young and vulnerable Kirk looked when he slept. McCoy had been the first to point it out those many years ago when they first became shipmates. At the time, Spock had thought it an unusual comment - how humans looked when they slept held little interest for him. Now he found himself almost always savouring these quiet moments standing guard over his friend.

Spock was still sitting there when Kirk woke up the next morning. It took him a few moments to realize where he was. He sat up with a yawn. "I'll admit I've been lazy on this vacation, but this is the first time I managed to stay in my clothes all night..." He grinned, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck to relieve some of the stiffness. "You get any sleep?"

"Not necessary on my part, Jim..."

"I know," broke in Kirk. "I'm a little ambivalent about going back to work, too." His face was solemn. "But, as you said, Spock, we're intruders here. We belong on the *Enterprise*." He grimaced. "Got a bit of sunburn yesterday - my back feels hot. Give it a couple of days and it'll turn into quite a tan." He got to his feet. "When's breakfast going..." He suddenly broke off remembering what had happened the night before. "Oh, right, we were starting our diets today, I forgot."

They broke camp, taking down the tent and rolling up the sleeping bags which neither of them had used and loaded Sidney and Jeffrey. The sun was hotter in this section - the cool air near the hills was absent here. Kirk threw a teasing glance at the Vulcan. "Spock, why don't you take off your shirt. Let's really get tanned - show the others we actually roughed it."

"Captain, I don't..."

"Oh, come on, Spock. I'm not asking you as your Captain."

Spock looked trapped. He could see no use in exposing himself unnecessarily to the scorching rays emitting from the large star of this planet, but he could see no way of refusing gracefully. With a pained look he slowly took off his shirt and folded it neatly into Ramble's saddle bag. He checked Jeffrey's pack, then swung up onto

the buckskin. He was still awkward in his riding, hard as he tried to copy Kirk who sat on his chestnut gelding as if he'd been born there. Kirk had teased him about being a greenhorn and Spock knew he deserved every barb. Try as he would, he knew he would never be comfortable on a horse.

The miles stretched along behind them as they jogged along. Since there was nothing to eat they didn't plan a rest stop but let the horses pick their own speed, stopping at intervals to water them. They knew they were close to home and even the mules gave no argument to the pace Charlie and Ramble set. The sun shone down. Kirk had put on his hat, Spock's was still in his pack where he had put it the first day. Having grown up in a desert climate he did not find the beating sun particularly uncomfortable.

They arrived in the small town mid-afternoon. Charlie shouted his greeting as they rode into the large stable-yard. Mr. Stone came out of his small office.

"Welcome back - and smack on time, too. I trust everything went all right."

"Everything was fine, Mr. Stone. The horses were as good as you claimed, and your mules...well, they have a sense of humor."

Stone laughed heartily. "You don't have to tell me. I can guess. Ramble looked after you, didn't he, Mr. Spock?"

Spock's eyebrows rose. "If by that you mean that he did as I asked, the answer is affirmative."

Stone turned to Kirk. "He always talk like that?"

Kirk smiled at Spock's insulted look. "Most of the time, Mr. Stone." He turned to unsaddle Charlie in order to save Spock from any teasing. Spock proceeded to do the same to Ramble. Mr. Stone gave a yell and some boys came running.

"Take the mules, David, get their packs off and turn them out. Stan, you take Charlie - Pat, Ramble. Groom them well, then give them their regular feed. Damp the grain. They've been on grass the past couple of weeks - dry grain'll be a bit hard on them right off."

Spock and Kirk fished their shirts out of the packs and put them on. Kirk looked wistfully at the rest of the gear, then turned to Mr. Stone. "Guess I'll leave you the rest of this stuff - where we're going we won't have any use for it."

David came running out of the house where he'd gone after turning Sidney and Jeffrey out in the field. He was carrying a large bag. "Here're your uniforms, Captain. Mom had them cleaned while you were gone."

"Why, thank you, David. How much do I owe you for that, Mr. Stone?"

"Forget it, Captain. You've more than repaid me with these supplies."

They said their goodbyes, Mr. Stone assuring them that they could rent his horses anytime. He rarely had customers who took better care of his animals. With one last lingering look Kirk turned to go back to the *Enterprise*, Spock, as, always, by his side.

Only Scotty was in the transporter room when they beamed aboard. Most of the crew were still planet-side, their leave not officially ending until noon of the next day. Kirk always returned a day or so early so that any details that needed his attention could be attended to before the ship was officially back on duty. As the Captain and First Officer materialized, Scotty's eyebrows rose a little. Kirk had obviously been out in the sun, the scarlet tone of his skin attesting a healthy sunburn and his hair was almost straw colored. But what really caught Scotty's eye was the bright green First Officer. He had never seen a sunburned Vulcan before and it had never occurred to him that one would turn green. Well, why not? They had green blood and on the rare occasions he had ever seen Spock blush he had always turned green.

"Welcome back, Captain, Mr. Spock. I trust you had a good leave."

"The best, Scotty," replied Kirk. "What did you do? Study technical journals?"

"Aye, sir, that I did. And no one disturbed me. I got a lot done."

"Scotty, you're...incurable."

"Mr. Scott," said Spock, "are they finished with the reprogramming of the computers?"

"They're doing the last runthrough tomorrow, Mr. Spock. Then we'll be ready to run them through under actual working conditions."

"Then, if you'll excuse me, Captain, I'd like to review the programming again if you don't mind."

"Go ahead, Spock, I've got things I have to do. I'll see you at dinner."

Scott watched in amusement as the Vulcan walked out of the transporter room, then turned to Kirk. "Captain, I've never seen anyone that color before..."

Kirk grinned. "Neither have I, Scotty, and it's all my fault, I'm afraid. I think Spock's trying to ignore it. Hopefully it'll tone down before tomorrow with a bit of luck."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but you're flaming a bit, yourself."

"I know. I'm radiating heat from the waist up, but I'm always doing that. No one will take any notice."

"Don't bet on it," thought Scotty as Kirk walked out the door.

Kirk found a lot of paper work waiting for him when he got to his quarters. He sat down shuffling through it - nothing exciting, just the usual boring red tape that every commanding officer was faced with. He dug in.

The buzzer rang. Without looking up Kirk pressed the automatic lock.

"Come in."

He glanced up after signing his name to the last report to see Spock standing there. He was a much darker green than earlier in the day. Kirk flinched a little.

"Spock..."

"Captain. Dinner has almost ended. I came to see if you still wanted to eat."

"Good grief, is it that late?" Kirk looked at the chronometer. He had been working for five hours straight. He realized he was starving. Shoving back the report he gingerly stood up. He really did get a burn - his shirt felt more like sack cloth than anything else.

"Come on, let's go."

There was no one else at dinner except McCoy. All the others still on board had eaten and left. McCoy glanced up to see a vision of red and green walk in. An astounded grin crossed his face as he watched his friends get their meal and come over to join him.

"Well, well," he said. "I didn't know it was Christmas on this planet."

"Come again, Bones," said Kirk, "it's not Christmas, you know that."

"Sure could have fooled me," said McCoy. "Why else would the decorations be red and green? That's an unusual color, Mr. Spock. Sure you don't want me to take your blood pressure?"

Spock gave him a withering look and turned his attention to his meal, deliberately ignoring the doctor. McCoy chuckled.

"How was your leave, Jim, get lots of sleep? I can see you got a lot of sun."

"It was great, Bones. I haven't enjoyed myself that much for a long time. You really should've come with us."

"Nope, don't like horses. Sides, I had a good time, too, but I won't go into details in front of our innocent Vulcan. I'd truly hate to see him turn any greener than he is right now!"

If looks could kill, McCoy would have been struck down on the spot. As it was, he lived to pick up his tray. "Well, I've got to check on supplies. I'll drop by later." As he passed Spock, the Vulcan could have sworn the doctor was singing "Jingle Bells".

When they finished dinner, Kirk challenged Spock to a game of chess. He was in a carefree mood and played a reckless game which almost drove Spock to distraction. Kirk's game plan was so illogical as to be non-existent. McCoy came in half way through softly singing "O Tannenbaum". Spock's game slipped even more. McCoy got a cup of coffee and came over to where they were sitting singing "White Christmas" quietly, almost inaudibly - but Spock could hear him. Kirk's voice interrupted him.

"Check."

Spock looked annoyed. He had played one of his best games and Kirk was beating him hollow. He stared at the board but McCoy had switched to "Frosty the Snowman" and he couldn't keep his mind on the game. His move proved disastrous.

"Checkmate."

McCoy had swung into a rousing version of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen". Spock could stand no more. He got to his feet.

"If you'll excuse me, Captain, I hate to be in the presence of a suffering member of the human race..."

"Suffering?" said McCoy. "Who's suffering. I'm just singing."

"Oh really, Doctor," said Spock with a blank face. "I thought you were in great pain - the noise you were emitting made the distinction very difficult." His eyes lit up as he saw McCoy start to lose his temper. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen." McCoy was still spluttering when the doors slid shut behind the Vulcan.

Then he laughed. Teasing Spock was so much fun - he always rose to the bait. He turned to Kirk who was busy rearranging the chess pieces.

"Jim, when you're finished there I think you'd better come to Sickbay and let me do something for that burn. I can feel you radiating heat from here."

"What about Spock?" asked Kirk feeling guilty about what had happened to his First Officer.

"We'll never now. How on earth did you manage to get him that color? I've seen the tips of his ears like that occasionally, but not his whole body."

"It was easy, Bones. I told him no one would believe we had been on vacation unless we came back with a tan,

but I'm afraid we went a bit overboard and now we're paying for it." A satisfied look came over his face. "It was worth it just to see Spock stop playing Vulcan for a few hours..."

Kirk left Sickbay, his skin now much cooler. He hesitated at the Vulcan's door but didn't knock. He decided that if Spock needed treatment he'd go to McCoy on his own. He silently said good night and went to his cabin.

Spock wasn't suffering - the surface pain of the sunburn was easily blocked out. He was sitting at his desk studying the computer system. The huge ship gradually grew silent.

Except Spock could have sworn he heard someone whistling, the tune they were whistling was "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly..."

INVASION

The lights in Sickbay were dim. An alien figure was seated in the shadows dressed in hospital garb, quiet, unmoving. The only sound was a steady beeping coming from the diagnostic bed where a similarly clothed alien lay equally quiet. Occasionally the man in the chair would look over to the bed, the expression on his face unchanging, the eyes missing nothing in their sweep, seeming to try to communicate with the man on the other side of the room.

Time passed. A nurse came in to check on the pale figure in the bed. She was new to the service and to this ship - she did not recognize either man. No change. A sympathetic look at the chair...no response, no movement at all. It had been the same since the two of them were brought in almost 48 hours ago. Sometimes the man would be standing beside the bed, sometimes moving restlessly around the room. She had never seen him asleep and he looked on the edge of exhaustion. The food that she brought in had remained untouched. There was no response to any inquiries, no matter how small or gentle.

"What happened to these people?" she wondered. Dr. McCoy had left strict orders that neither was to be bothered. If they needed anything he personally would see to it. No further explanation, the order given with a look that dared any question. She was assigned to their care. The regular duty nurse, Christine Chapel, had been sent on special assignment to help update the staff and medical procedures on Gamus VII. She vaguely overheard an argument between Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel about the sudden order, raised voices, then a door closed and the voices were gone, and so was Christine. She felt lost. Miss Chapel had been helping her to settle in, introducing her to the others in the crew. It was difficult trying to remember 400 people who, at the moment, seemed like one faceless mass in gold, red, or blue uniforms. Now she was herself confined to Sickbay, meals brought in, out of contact with the few people she had managed to know in that short space of time between leaving Starbase Nine and the arrival of these two men.

Had she known who they were she would have been stunned...for sitting in the corner was Captain James T. Kirk, current commander of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, and lying on the bed, out of reach, unable to bridge the gap between deep consciousness and awareness, was his First Officer, Mr. Spock. She picked up the untouched tray she had left earlier and, with a quiet word, left the room. James Kirk followed her exit with his eyes. He was aware that she was in the room, knew why she was there, was grateful for the concern that she was showing to Spock and himself, yet, for her sake and for the sake of the entire crew of the *Enterprise*, he dared not speak to her or let her know who or what they were.

Again he looked over to the figure of his friend across the room and frowned. There was nothing that he could do for Spock, nothing that any of them could do. McCoy had explained that to him on the surface of the planet when their distress call, previously structured only to be heard in Sickbay, to completely bypass the usual channels to the bridge, had brought the doctor charging down to the planet even though he normally would do anything rather than go through the transporter. Again when they were both safely in Sickbay, brought there when all the corridors were empty so that no one would suspect who was aboard, McCoy tried to convince Kirk of the complete impossibility of treatment. Yes, maybe someone from Spock's home planet of Vulcan could reach down into his mind and bring him back to the reality of the world, but there wasn't time. Besides, no one must know that he and Spock were aboard the *Enterprise*. It would endanger the lives of too many people. It would wreck plans that had been so carefully laid out. It could destroy the entire galaxy. Still, something had to be done. There was so much work and without Spock, Kirk felt it would be impossible to carry out the rest of the mission.

Again he rose and went over to the bed, running his hand through his hair as he did so. Looking at his hand he felt a tired smile spread over his face - it was covered with a black dye. So much for McCoy's wonder potion. He suspected that his hair was gradually becoming two-tone. Probably the yellowish color of his skin was fading back

to its normal shade as well. He heard the sound of a door open but did not turn toward it. He was aware of footsteps that stopped at the entrance to the room, that someone was staring at him. Finally he turned and looked into the worried eyes of Dr. Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of the Starship *Enterprise*.

"You should be worried, Doctor," Kirk murmured, extending his hand. "If this had happened two days ago it wouldn't only be Spock lying here. The wrath of Starfleet would probably be sitting on your head right now...except for the fact that we would all be dead. You said that this coloring would last until you injected an antidote against it!" Seeing that his observations and tone only seemed to upset the good doctor further, he smiled briefly, and continued, "Never mind. It isn't important anymore. Nothing is. This whole stupid, insane idea of some desk-bound bureaucrat who wanted to see his name in the history books and now my best friend is lying there helpless...as helpless as we are to do anything about it..." He broke off, unable to put into words the rage and futility that he felt.

He heard the whir of McCoy's medical scanner but paid no attention, just stayed with his head buried in his arms, leaning against the wall. Then he heard the hiss of the hypospray and spun around - too late. Everything started to blur and he felt his knees turn to rubber. Then he was embraced in strong arms which carried him to a bed. Very dully he heard a voice say, "A man can only drive himself so long before the body rebels, Jim. Your mind is trying to tell you that. You will sleep now for a time. Perhaps when you wake up you will find some meaning or sense to all of this. I hope so, for your sanity and for mine."

McCoy stood looking at his Captain for a few minutes, then turned and went to Spock. He would give all he knew for the Vulcan to ridicule his medical knowledge, for the chemicals were, at that moment, turning Spock's hair a mustard color. But he knew that it would not happen. No voice would come from that still body...just gentle breathing and readings that would continue to astonish and cause such grave concern.

Sighing deeply, he left the room and returned to his own office. He had not left Sickbay since his patients arrived; it had become a bedroom and dining area. McCoy sat at his desk, deep in thought. At least Jim and Spock had made it this far...That was more than could have been said for other starship crews.

He recorded his latest entry into the medical log. It sounded depressingly like the last one and the one before. No change...little hope.

Finishing that joyless task, he leaned back in his chair and reflected upon the happenings of the past month. He had been working in his office when the signal came over the intercom. It was the Captain. He had just returned from a meeting with Admiral Komack who was at Starbase Nine and it was urgent that he see McCoy immediately.

"Right, Jim. Nothing much going on here. I await your pleasure."

"No, Bones. Come to my quarters. Spock is with me. I want no one to know that you have seen us. Make sure you mention this to no one. Kirk out."

McCoy stared at the intercom for a few seconds. Something definitely was wrong. Why on his own ship did the Captain not want to be seen with his chief medical officer? Jim's voice had sounded normal enough but over an amplified machine it was hard to tell, although he would admit that to no man since he had made several diagnoses in just that manner. He knew how tired Jim was. They had been due for R & R two months ago when the strange disappearance of entire tactical crews from other starships had begun. All ships had been put on alert status and leaves cancelled. Even Spock looked unhappy, if that were possible. He had already complained to McCoy about the diminishing efficiency of the entire crew, most notably the senior officers who had been under great strain in their last few missions. Only Scotty was pleased. He had been wanting to test some modifications he had made to the main warp drive engines, and orbiting around some R & R planet was not the ideal place to do it.

Not being sure what he would find in the Captain's quarters, McCoy armed himself with a medical kit and a bottle of Octavian brandy. He was not certain why he picked up the latter but something told him he was going to be facing a problem that would defy normal medical treatment. Strolling, he hoped inconspicuously, he arrived a few minutes later outside a door with the simple marker, James T. Kirk. He pressed the buzzer and the door opened immediately.

Kirk was sitting at his desk and Spock was at the other side of the room, standing with his back to the Captain and the door. Pausing in the entrance, McCoy suddenly realized that he had walked into the middle of an argument. The tension was almost visible. "This is serious," he thought. He had rarely seen Jim and Spock at odds with each other. Looking at both men, he put down his medical kit and brought out the brandy.

"Didn't know what I would find here so came prepared for any eventuality," he explained, noticing the questioning look on Kirk's face. Here, Jim, you look as though you could use this. Your color is almost exactly the same as Spock's, which isn't saying much, except green is not normal for the human species."

Kirk smiled thinly but accepted the offered glass. Spock turned and glanced at Kirk, then said, "I cannot possibly understand, Doctor, why you think the Captain is green, which he most obviously is not; nor how you feel

that brandy would restore his normal coloring even if he was!"

"Skip it, Spock," said Kirk with a slightly wider smile. McCoy noted with relief that the tension seemed to be easing. "We don't have time to talk about the benefits of the good doctor's prescriptions. Bones," he said somberly, "we need your help. No one is to know what I am about to tell you, not even Scotty. This is going to be hard for you but very necessary for the safety of all aboard the *Enterprise*."

McCoy looked at Kirk, then at Spock, but the latter had once again turned toward the wall and from the stillness of his position seemed lost in his own thoughts.

"We were called to Starbase Nine, as you know," continued Kirk, "by Admiral Komack. A starship was destroyed yesterday by cold-blooded sabotage. Bones, I knew those men. I went to the Academy with a lot of them. And now they are gone...I can't believe it!" His voice broke slightly. Immediately Spock was at his side, saying nothing, just quietly supportive. Kirk hesitated a moment, then continued. "A signal was received at Starfleet Command this morning. It took some time to decode as it was not from any member of the Federation...essentially the contents said to surrender or have the galaxy destroyed. And they have the power, Bones. They proved it so easily by destroying that starship."

Instinct warned McCoy to tread carefully. Kirk looked ready to snap and he didn't want to trigger it by saying the wrong thing. So he poured another brandy and held it out. Tired hazel eyes looked into concerned blue ones and smiled their thanks. Kirk got up and started pacing the room.

"Anyway, the reason I called you here is because it has been decided by the powers-that-be that we are going to be the saviors of the galaxy...or to be more precise, two of us are." He glanced at Spock with a rueful grin and received back a slightly raised eyebrow. McCoy caught the exchange and wondered what the two of them could be laughing about. This sounded rather serious to him.

"We need your scientific expertise, Doctor," Spock took up the story as Kirk seemed to be staring deeply into his glass. At this, McCoy looked surprised. Spock very rarely admitted that the ship's doctor had any idea of what he was doing, much less was an expert. However, he kept his thoughts to himself as Spock suddenly seemed oblivious of the others as he continued, "We must be prepared to be as the others are. We must look and act as they do. We must not appear to be different in any way..." At that point he stopped speaking, and, after a moment, Kirk took over.

"What Spock means, Bones, is that we need a disguise. Starfleet had discovered the identity of our 'invaders'. I won't bore you with the details of how, but we need to be made up as Zenians."

At this last bit of information, McCoy's mouth dropped. He knew little about Zenians except the general knowledge that everyone had. A race that would make Genghis Khan or Colonel Green proud. The Federation had had a few scuffles in the past with their armed forces but nothing serious. However, they had proven themselves to be warriors without mercy and there was no way that one would want to be taken alive by them. They made the Klingons with their mind sifter look like babes-in-arms.

Kirk seemed not to notice McCoy's expression and went on, "We need a disguise that cannot be altered - hair color, skin color. This has to be done medically or surgically. Spock's ears will prove no problem. Some of the Zenians trace their ancestry to Romulans and have pointed ears..." He broke off suddenly, seeing the comical look on McCoy's face. If the situation had not been so serious he would have laughed out loud. As it was, he laid a hand on McCoy's arm and said, "Bones, is it possible?"

Shaking himself, McCoy managed to look at Kirk and nod, not trusting himself to speak, somehow knowing only a strangled croak would get past the hard lump in his throat.

"Good. All work will be done here. As far as the crew knows, we are down on Starbase Nine. The technician in the transporter room is Admiral Komack's aide. He will be on duty there until the mission is over, one way or the other." A look of grim determination crossed Kirk's face and he looked as though he might say more, then he sighed slightly and turned away. McCoy was dying to ask what the mission was going to be but had the feeling, rightly so, that no one would tell him. Sitting down on his bed, the Captain looked at him and said, "Spock and I need to become Zenians. Do what you need to as fast as you can. We will be waiting."

McCoy picked up his medical kit, went to take the brandy, then set it down again saying, "No, I think it would do the most good here," and left.

Spock exchanged glances with Kirk who smiled briefly and said, "He is a good man, Spock, and a good friend. This is going to put him through hell." Spock nodded, and looked at the closed door through which McCoy had passed only a few seconds earlier.

Back in his lab, their source of concern was checking the computer for the right chemicals to change the bodily functions and structure of one human and one Vulcan to those of a Zenian. He was lost in his computations and did not notice that Nurse Chapel had come in. She was even now peering over his shoulder to see what was causing him to

be so absorbed in his work that he failed to respond to her cheery greeting. She only caught a glimpse of a most peculiar formula before he whirled around.

"Nurse Chapel!" he said sharply. "Why on earth are you creeping around Sickbay, prying into something which is none of your concern!" He was instantly sorry. He had scared the living daylights out of poor Christine, who had done nothing wrong. It was just that he had so much tension bottled up inside that there was no way he could have controlled it.

"I'm s-s-sorry, Doctor," she stammered. "I did speak to you but you didn't seem to hear me. I am sorry if I interrupted anything."

"That's all right, Nurse. I am the one who should apologize. I was a bit wrapped up in my calculations and didn't hear you. Did you need me for something?"

"Not really, Doctor. It's just that I heard that the Captain and Mr. Spock have been hospitalized on the Starbase and I was wondering if it was something serious."

"Great," thought McCoy. "Here are my patients already covered with an alibi and I don't know what is supposed to be the matter with them!" To Christine, he said, "No, I don't think there is anything to be concerned about. The medical staff on the Starbase is first rate but I am checking here to be absolutely sure they are on the right track." He knew he sounded vague but his mind was not up to concocting strange diseases. However, Nurse Chapel seemed satisfied and left shortly after, offering to help in any way that she could.

A few minutes later, McCoy was on his way back to Kirk's quarters, a hypospray of chemicals in his medikit. Again the door opened instantly at his press of the buzzer. This time Spock was seated and Jim was sprawled out motionless on the bed. Spock signalled McCoy to be quiet.

"He's asleep, Doctor. Please work quietly. It may be some time before he will be able to do so again and he is already exhausted."

"What about you, Spock?" Bones countered. "You have been pushing yourself as hard as Jim has. Don't you have a breaking point?"

"Vulcans don't tire easily, Doctor."

"I know Vulcans don't, Mr. Spock, but surely your human half bogs down every now and again!"

Before Spock had a chance to answer, Kirk opened his eyes. Seeing the two of them squared off in the position of one of their endless squabbles, he sat up and said, "Gentlemen, that conversation, whatever it is, can continue at a future date. Bones, did you manage to do it?"

Wishing he could say no, McCoy nodded.

"Fine. Let's get on with it."

McCoy brought out his hypospray, adjusted the setting, and held it against Spock's arm. Kirk watched with interest as his first officer's complexion gradually darkened and his hair went white.

"An intriguing procedure, Doctor," commented Spock, looking at his reflection. "Remind me sometime to ask what the formula for this might be."

Without answering, McCoy once again adjusted the hypospray and injected Kirk.

"Are you sure this will prove to be permanent, Bones?" he asked. "I would hate to become a human again in the midst of a group of Zenians."

"No way, Jim. You will remain like that until another of my magical potions enters your system." He grinned in spite of himself. The Captain was turning a definite yellow and his hair jet black. He felt he should add a few stripes to complete the effect. Kirk grinned back, then sobered as he remembered why this change was taking place.

"Bones," he said, "we will be picked up shortly by a shuttlecraft. They will be delivering cargo and we should be able to slip out undetected. Scotty will be placed in temporary command and will be ordered to resume normal patrols. The transponders you implanted will be relayed to Sickbay. In case of an emergency, you will have to come get us, if there is anything left to get. I'm sorry I can't tell you more but as yet we really don't know much ourselves."

McCoy gazed steadily at his friend, then lowered his eyes and nodded. He gathered his things and left quickly. For more than a month he did not hear a word from either of them, until two days ago when the signal he had been half fearing was heard over his intercom and he had found on the planet the destruction that he had feared...but it had happened to the one he least expected it would.



"Stardate 4746.9: Lieutenant-Commander Scott for Captain Kirk. We are preparing to leave orbit around Starbase Nine. The Captain and First Officer are quarantined in the medical center on the Starbase. I have been in constant communication with the medical staff and they assure me that everything is being done to find the cause of the illness and the cure. They are in no immediate danger, just uncomfortable, but are being well looked after. Chief

Medical Officer McCoy agrees with the treatment they are receiving. I have been ordered to resume patrols as temporary commander of the *Enterprise* until the return of Captain Kirk or Commander Spock."



Scotty was fuming! He had been placed in temporary command of the *Enterprise*. For most officers it would have been a great honor. For Scott it was a disaster. He wanted to be on the spot when his new engines were put to the test and now he was stuck on the Bridge. Not only that, but Headquarters had replaced the entire transporter crew, including Mr. Kyle, his trusted lieutenant. Until further notice, a wee lad named MacNeil was in charge and Scott was under orders to keep out of the transporter room, as were the rest of the crew. The Captain and the First Officer were not there, the whole journey reeked of trouble and there wasn't a thing he could do to prevent it.



It was dark in Sickbay when he awoke, dark and very quiet. His body felt like it was weighted down with anti-gravs but at least his brain didn't seem so fuzzy. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw McCoy standing just inside the door. He seemed to be adjusting something he was holding in his hand. After some fiddling he appeared satisfied and walked over to where Spock was lying. Kirk could not see clearly what was going on but heard the hiss of the hypo, then saw the diagnostic board above the bed light up. Various arrows fluctuated and blips and bleeps sounded around the room. Kirk cursed that he didn't know more about medicine. The readings could have meant anything and from this distance he couldn't see the expression on McCoy's face. He wanted to get up but his body just wouldn't respond to his command. Finally, after another injection, the doctor switched off the lights over Spock and came to check on Kirk.

"How is he, Bones?"

A long silence, still hard to see. Then a sigh, "I don't know, Jim. I have injected every medicine known to science that might be of benefit to a Vulcan. I am now working on the ones that science has never heard of. As yet no response, nothing." Feeling Kirk's pulse, he said, "How about you?"

Kirk's face darkened as he remembered why he was lying on the bed. "That was a dirty trick, Doctor..." he began angrily.

"But a necessary one," McCoy interrupted. "Look, Jim, a month ago an exhausted man left this ship, a man who had no right to be doing anything, much less trying to save a galaxy. How much rest have you had while you were gone? How many nights of peaceful, untroubled sleep? You were lucky I only gave you a mild sedative. I could have put you under for a week!"

Kirk couldn't help but smile at McCoy's frustrated protests. He really was upset. "OK, Bones, forgive and forget. Is it possible to stand up? I seem to have forgotten how."

Aided by a strong arm, he managed to get to McCoy's office. The doctor ordered a meal to be sent up and it arrived almost immediately. McCoy looked at Kirk and gave one order. "Eat!" He had a feeling that there would be an argument and he frankly wasn't in the mood. Kirk opened his mouth to protest but then suddenly realized how hungry he was and proceeded to eat every scrap that was on the plate. He was on his second cup of coffee when the silence was broken.

"Well, Jim?"

Kirk looked over the rim of his cup and raised his eyebrows.

"You know what I mean," said McCoy quietly. "What happens next?"

"I go back."

The answer brought McCoy leaping out of his chair. "You are an idiot," he roared. "You are begging to get killed! Have you lost your mind?"

The young nurse whom Kirk had watched earlier come rushing in, the sound of McCoy's shout having been heard in the next room. She saw him standing over one of the strangers, very red-faced, and the man was looking up at him with a rather bemused expression. Both realized at the same time that she was there. McCoy looked a bit confused and embarrassed. The other man turned his head away and picked up a cup of coffee.

"Doctor, I heard shouting. I thought perhaps there was trouble."

"No. Thank you, Nurse, no trouble. Just a slight misunderstanding. I appreciate your concern."

She looked from one man to the other, feeling that something was very wrong but sensing that she was not wanted. "Very well, Doctor, but if you need me..."

"Thank you again," responded McCoy, "but if won't be necessary."

The other man didn't move, didn't acknowledge her presence.

"All right, Doctor," she said, and withdrew, feeling even more curiosity. She had not seen the strange man talking before. Also, she couldn't put her finger on it, but his appearance was different. He had on the same clothes but surely there was a change. Suddenly she remembered. His hair! It had been black, his skin yellow.

Now it was brown and his skin a normal tone. Also, he looked vaguely familiar. She didn't think she knew him but somehow felt she should. Sitting down on her bed she was soon lost in thought.

The argument was still raging in the next room, although, at this point, it was completely one-sided. McCoy was coming out with every logical idea he could think of - and he few illogical ones - to dissuade Jim from going back. Kirk heard him out with no comment until every last thought was exhausted, then quietly repeated, "I'm going back."

Seeing that McCoy was going to start his tirade all over again, he held up a hand. "No, Bones, don't say anything. Just hear me out." He got up, still feeling shaky but at least seemingly able to function.

"I'm an important cog in the wheel, believe it or not. That is why Spock is now lying in the next room. We arrived on Denex IV at the same time as Pleut, Commander-in-Chief of the Zenian armed forces. Do you know, Bones... could you even start to imagine what it would be like to look at the enemy square in the face and discover your mirror image?" McCoy started to say something but Kirk cut him off. "No, let me finish. Pleut and I could have been twins. Spock saw an immediate advantage and the Zenian was waylaid. I took his place. Spock was my aide. This plan to destroy the galaxy...all the threats were from me, Bones. My words, my actions. Now do you see why I have to go back? Because, if I don't, my orders will be successfully carried out. There will be no one there to put a stop to it and I will have destroyed my world and all that you and I have known."

"Jim, I am still your medical officer. You can't do it. You have worn yourself out. You are running on nerves alone. How long can you keep your guard up? You are bound to slip somewhere. Admit it, you are having trouble just walking around this room, much less trying to be the Commander-in-Chief of an invasion force. Damn it - you won't even have Spock there..."

Suddenly, McCoy knew he had gone too far. A look of pain crossed Kirk's face, then he said fiercely to his chief surgeon, "That's enough, Bones. It is because of me that Spock is lying in there and you know it. Damn command decisions. I had to order a Federation crew to death. Spock, on my orders, tried to disrupt the executions in such a way that those men wouldn't die. He managed - I don't know how - but he couldn't save himself. And because of his loyalty - his unspoken loyalty, Doctor - his life is in jeopardy. Your orders are to get Spock back on his feet. I don't care how you do it but I need him. I am putting the responsibility of this mission squarely on your shoulders. You're right, I can't do it alone. Spock is the only one who can help me. So, I am beaming back down and if and when this 'glorious mission' fails, you can blame yourself, Doctor."

The two of them stood glaring at each other for a moment, then Kirk turned away saying, "I need another injection to change my appearance and please, make it more successful than the last one." He walked out of the room without looking back.

McCoy found him a few moments later, his hand resting on Spock's arm, his eyes shadowed, expressionless. He injected the hypo and watched silently as Kirk changed back into the clothes he had been wearing on the planet. By the time he was ready to go, he once more was the dark-haired, yellow-skinned leader he was supposed to be.

"Call the transporter room, Bones," he said icily. "One to beam down."

Suddenly the nurse burst into the room. "Doctor," she cried, "that man in your office, that was Captain..." Her voice faded out, for standing in front of her was the same man, but obviously an alien. She was dumbfounded. How could her eyes have deceived her so completely?

McCoy looked at her, bitterness in his face, then turned and walked out, leaving her with the stranger. When he returned they were exactly as he had left them. Neither had moved nor spoken. "They're ready for you," he said.

The stranger looked again at the man on the bed, lightly touched his shoulder, then brushed past the doctor and left the room. They both looked at the closed door for several minutes, then McCoy turned to her, "Nurse, I want every bit of information ever recorded concerning Vulcans and I want it right now!" She shot off to obey. She had never heard McCoy speak like that. The tone was brutal but also anguished. She had no idea what caused it but she knew she had better move fast. The thoughts that she had had of who the stranger might have been had gone completely out of her head.

"Mr. Scott," said Chekov, "someone just beamed down to the planet's surface."

Scotty looked long and hard at Chekov until the latter almost squirmed under the scrutiny. Slowly, he resumed his position in the command chair, trying to make sense of the past few days. They had been patrolling a lonely section of Region 796 when, suddenly, they were flying at top warp speed to planet Denex IV. It was registered in computer banks as nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, no detailed survey, not inhabited. Scanners now showed massive activity and many registered life forms. Somebody or something had beamed aboard, Doctor McCoy had literally disappeared, and he was under orders to do nothing! How could a person possibly command a starship when he was ordered to ignore all he saw and heard?

"Mr. Sulu," he heard himself say, "take over the con. I am going for a long walk." He was aware of the

surprised look on the lieutenant's face but did not elaborate.

Finding himself in the turbo-lift with no particular place to go, he decided to head for the Observation Deck. At least there he could get a feeling of wide open spaces, maybe shake off this feeling of uselessness. Walking through the corridors he noted the efficient movements of the crew and appreciated, not for the first time, the obvious touch of Captain Kirk, who had put so much effort into making the *Enterprise* the best ship in Starfleet. Then he remembered. Captain Kirk was not aboard. Blumly, he went through the doors onto the Observation Deck. He spent several minutes watching some of the technicians servicing one of the shuttlecraft on the flight deck below. Suddenly, he was aware he was not alone. Looking up, he saw Doctor McCoy and the look of anguish and despair on his face caused Scotty to call out and hurry over to his friend.

"Doctor, what's the matter? You look ghastly! What's happened?"

McCoy jumped. His mind had been miles away and he had not realized that Scotty had arrived on the Observation Deck. "Sorry, Scotty," he said. "Didn't realize anyone was here. Didn't mean for anyone to find me."

"Doctor..." started Scott.

"No, Scotty, I'm all right. But I have just been ordered to help save the galaxy and if I fail I will be out of a job." Seeing the confusion on Scotty's face, McCoy grinned and went on. "I don't know what I mean either but for my sake, and for his, let's hope I can do it." Giving Scotty a slap on the shoulder, McCoy left.

"Now, what do you suppose he meant by that?" mused Scott. "And for whose sake? Who is 'he'?" Finding that it meant no sense, Scotty continued his walk, dropping by Engineering and was pleased to find that all checkups had proved that his newly-modified engines had performed most efficiently on the high warp trip to the planet. He returned to the Bridge in a better mood, only to have Mr. Chekov report that there seemed to be a general mobilization of the inhabitants below.

Chekov's scanners were registering correctly. There was movement on the planet's surface. Pleut, the Commander-in-Chief, was, at that moment, meeting with his division leaders, putting the finishing touches on the invasion plans.

After they had left, Kirk sat alone, trying to forget how tired he felt. With Spock at his side he had to keep up a pretense. Now he was close to letting go. Then he had someone who knew the grave situation, who could help with the instant decisions, who shared the feeling of futility and helplessness. Still, he couldn't give up now. He was the only one who could do anything to stop this senseless destruction.

He left the chambers and headed over to Communications. He was going to have to bluff his way through this one. There was a good possibility that he would be caught and the thought wasn't pleasant. If the Vulcan was here, with his vast technical knowledge, he could, no doubt, have bypassed the communication base entirely but he, Kirk, did not have sufficient knowledge of the circuitry to attempt such a feat. With his luck he would probably beam his distress signal right into the major forces of the invasion fleet. Entering the communication enclosure, he told the officer in charge that he had a delicate message to send and wanted to be left undisturbed. He dared not order the man to silence. That would cause too much suspicion. He could only hope that it would not go further than this room, that Zenian loyalty was as good as Human. Setting the frequency of the transmitter on distress, he signalled the *Enterprise*.

Lieutenant Uhura, as he knew she would be, was monitoring all frequencies on her board when suddenly a signal started to bleep. The message was relayed once, very quickly, and in a familiar code. The message ended with the two words in plain English, "Ask McCoy." She stared at what she had written, then tried to pick up the signal again but the transmission had been shut off at the other end.

"Mr. Scott," she said, "I just received a message from the planet's surface. It's in code, sir, but one of ours - one that has not been broken. But the strangest thing is that the message ended with two words: 'ask McCoy'."

Scotty wasted no time. "Lieutenant," he said, "have the message decoded and pipe the results to Doctor McCoy's office." This last hung in the air as Scotty disappeared into the turbo-lift.

It seemed to take forever to get to Deck Five. Scotty knew that McCoy must have had something to do with this mystery all along. He never kept to himself this much. Since they had left Starbase Nine he had seen him only once, and then it had been a ravaged man on the Observation Deck, not the man he knew. He burst into Sickbay but there was no one there. Then he heard voices in the next room.

"But, Doctor, are you sure it is safe?"

"No, Nurse, I am not sure of anything, but we have tried everything else and nothing has worked. So, we try the impossible. This worked in the twentieth century. No reason to think it might be less effective." There was a slight buzzing sound and Scotty got to the doorway in time to hear the doctor say, "Now!" and to see.

McCoy heard a gasp and looked up to see Scotty standing just inside the room. However, he had no time to

acknowledge his presence or explain what he was doing. It was too dangerous to be distracted at this moment. He returned his attention to Spock who was lying, alternately stiff, then going into a series of convulsive spasms. He had wires attached to several areas of his head, the wires leading to a power generator beside the bed.

"Higher voltage, Nurse," he ordered. "So far this is doing no good at all."

No response. She just stared at him. McCoy leaned across her without a word and turned a knob. Spock's body twisted more violently.

"Doctor McCoy!" It was Scotty, finally galvanized into action. He did not know who the person lying on the bed was but he knew that no man could survive what was happening. McCoy had obviously taken leave of his senses. He was acting like his counterpart would have in the Alternate Universe. "Have you gone mad? You are going to kill him! A human body isn't made to have electricity flow through it!"

"Shut up, Scotty. This isn't a human and this is a desperation attempt. He'll die if this doesn't..."

At this point, Spock's eyes flashed open. There didn't seem to be any recognition but McCoy slammed off the current. He wouldn't admit it to anyone but he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. He might have just killed Spock for all he knew.

Furious, Scotty was about to reply when the intercom whistled. "Lieutenant Uhura - Mr. Scott, please reply." Scotty went over to the wall and hit the reply button.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Mr. Scott, the message is decoded. It says: 'Leave immediately for Starbase Nine. Top warp speed. Implement Invasion Plan 2. Ask McCoy.' That's all, sir." She seemed to be on the point of saying more, but didn't.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Tell Mr. Chekov to plot a course for Starbase Nine. I will contact him in a few minutes. Scott out."

He was still looking at the intercom when a familiar voice from behind him said, "Perhaps it would be best, Mr. Scott, if you obeyed the Captain's orders without letting human emotion blind your thoughts."

Whirling around, Scott found himself face to face with the First Officer of the *Enterprise*. Admittedly, his hair and colour were a wee bit peculiar, but nevertheless, it was he. "Mr. Spock!" he cried. "What the devil..."

"I assure you, Mr. Scott, I am not the devil, although I feel a slight kinship with his body heat at the moment. A most effective treatment, Doctor McCoy. May I congratulate you on your innovation."

"Don't thank me, Mr. Spock. Thank some ancient country doctor who used to think that this was an advanced method of dealing with muddled brains."

"I assure you, Doctor, my brain was not, nor is it, 'muddled'. However, I cannot argue that the cure was effective. Mr. Scott," he said, turning to the engineer who was standing behind him, beaming, "I suggest that we leave for Starbase Nine with no further delay. It is imperative we arrive there as far ahead of the invasion force as possible." Noticing the falling expression on Scott's face, he went on, "It is impossible for me to take command as I am not even on this ship. You are still functioning as Commanding Officer and, as such, must order the *Enterprise* on its way. Doctor," he continued, "I have noticed my appearance..."

"Drat," thought McCoy. "I was hoping he would miss that." He had forgotten how observant Vulcans were.

"I will need another injection, preferably more permanent this time." McCoy winced, remembering how recently someone else had made that same statement. "I must catch up with the Captain. Mr. Scott, you are wasting time!"

Scotty had been staring at Spock but now hit the intercom button. "Navigation," he ordered.

"Navigation, Chekov here."

"Mr. Chekov, lay in a course for Starbase Nine and leave orbit. Warp 8 as soon as possible."

"Uh, Warp 8, sir?" questioned Chekov, not believing his ears.

"Aye, laddie," came the reply, "and quite possibly Warp 9." Chekov looked at Sulu whose expression clearly read that he felt Scotty had lost his mind completely. However, he laid in the course and they headed out into space.

Very quickly, Spock filled Scotty in with some of the details of the past month. "Doctor McCoy can tell you the rest, Mr. Scott. Right now I want you to prepare a shuttlecraft for launch after making the following alterations."

A quick conversation, then Scotty said, "Aye, sir," and hurried out.

Spock dressed himself in the clothes of a Zenian warrior and by the time McCoy had finished preparing the hypodermic, he was ready. A quick injection completed the transition from Federation officer to alien invader. McCoy looked at him for a moment, then said, "Find Jim, Spock. Look after him. There is no way he can keep going. Don't let him destroy himself." Spock returned his look steadily, then nodded and left. McCoy let out a deep breath and headed for the bridge. It was no longer necessary to stay bottled up in Sickbay. He had to know what was happening. As he left, he told his poor, confused nurse to get some sleep, he would be back. She got the idea,

correctly, that she was still stuck in Sickbay and resignedly headed for her room, thinking that, maybe, when this was over, she would ask for a transfer to shore duty. If this was what space travel was all about, she didn't want any part of it.

Scotty and McCoy arrived on the bridge at the same time.

"Warp 8, Mr. Scott," was the first thing they heard.

"Steady as she goes, lad," replied Scotty. "We have a wee bit of a lead. Let's see if we can hold it."

"Aye, sir," came the doubtful response, but the *Enterprise* kept her heading and was flying toward Starbase Nine.

"Scotty," said McCoy, under his breath. "Spock..."

"He's away, Doctor," replied Scotty, equally quiet, "to whatever awaits him, and us..." The two friends looked at each other soberly, then Scott turned away. Hitting the panel on the command chair, he signalled Engineering.

"Jerry," he said to his chief assistant, "I want to go to Warp 9. Can we handle it?"

"That's what we modified the engines for, sir," came the response. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"All right, laddie. Keep them going until they start to shake apart. Bridge out."

Turning back to his helmsman, he said, "Mr. Sulu, Warp 9." He sensed the tension on the Bridge. The *Enterprise* was not built to do Warp 9, much less maintain it for any length of time. However, the only sound was a quiet, "Warp 9, sir," from Sulu.

Far behind the fast flying ship came a large fleet, headed by the command vessel carrying Pleut and his chief officers. They were under orders of silence - no communication between ships, no matter what the circumstances. Kirk fervently hoped discipline would hold and utter chaos result. If Scotty had received his message and acted on it, this fleet would be attacked by a massive armada from the Federation. The small, quick-striking, short-range vessels - they would be absolutely deadly since they were fighting for their lives. Kirk felt a tight smile cross his face. The ship the Federation would be gunning for was this one. Well, that's what he was here for...to botch this mission so completely that there would be no hope of victory for the Zenians. Destruction of the command ship and chief personnel would certainly help that cause.

Lost deep in thought, Kirk failed to notice Leader Jawl beside him. Seeing the grim expression on his commander's face, Jawl hesitated disturbing him. However, he carried unsettling news which must be brought to Pleut's attention, so he carefully put his hand on Kirk's arm. He felt the man under his hand freeze and was surprised, but put it down to tension caused by the impending fight.

"Pardon me, Commander, but a Federation ship is approaching."

There was no movement, no sign of acknowledgement from the seated figure. He could not know the sinking feeling Kirk was experiencing. What was the *Enterprise* doing here? How could Scotty have managed to get the message so fouled up? What could McCoy have told him?

"Commander?" Seeing that he had Kirk's attention now, Jawl continued. "It is a small ship, badly damaged. Our communications are picking up a distress signal. It sounds like one of our people!"

Kirk's heart leapt. Could it possibly be...? Who else could it be? Looking directly at Leader Jawl, Kirk asked, "Is it possible to beam aboard any survivors?"

"But Commander, the orders...total silence!"

"The Commander gave the orders," said Kirk in a deadly voice, "the Commander can rescind them. I repeat, is it possible to beam aboard any survivors?"

"Yes, Commander," came the reluctant reply.

"Then do so, now. Xant, you are in charge. Keep on course 241, mark 7. Maintain speed 3 until I return."

"Acknowledged, Commander."

Kirk and Jawl walked in strained silence to the transporter. The technicians were flipping switches, preparing the mechanism and locking onto whatever was in the craft.

"I want that person or persons brought aboard - Security at the ready." Several men took out their weapons. "I want the arrivals in a condition where they can talk!" snapped Kirk, noticing the setting on the weapon of the man beside him.

The buzzing of the transporter sounded and one figure started forming. Weapons were raised. Then, standing in front of them was what appeared to be a Zenian national, white-haired, dark-skinned, with pointed ears. The newcomer took a slow look around the room and one eyebrow raised slightly. Kirk could hardly control his expression. He wanted to throw himself on that figure and yell his relief. However, he turned to the transporter chief and said, "I want that Federation craft destroyed. Leave no trace of it. Security, escort this man to my quarters and keep him under guard." He noticed there was no reaction from anyone in the room. No sign of recognition. He praised the stars that all Zenians of Romulan descent looked almost exactly alike. None of them recognized Spock as Kirk's

former aide. "If he resists, restrain him, but do not injure." Spock left, followed by three burly Tzenians just itching for him to start some trouble.

Kirk contacted the command control and checked on the progress of the force - on course and on schedule. He left word he could be found in his quarters, excused Jawl, and headed for his friend.

Arriving at his destination, he found Spock sprawled face down on the floor, one of the guards standing over him. Kirk asked no questions for none would have been expected. He dismissed the man and not until the door was firmly shut did he hurry over to the prostrate form.

"Spock, Spock! Are you all right?"

The figure cautiously rose from the floor. "I am quite undamaged, Captain. Discretion deemed it necessary to avoid further provocation. Lying on the floor seemed to be the only logical way to avoid open violence." Kirk didn't question him further. It was obvious Spock had run into some rough treatment before he had arrived.

"I see McCoy obeyed his last orders," he said changing the subject.

"If you are talking about my health, Captain, the good doctor has, as usual, done an efficient job of making me wish I had never met a human medical practitioner. My stomach has yet to return to a level below my intestines and my head does not appear to be properly attached above my eyes..."

"Enough, Spock," said Kirk, chuckling. "I get the picture. Tell me, did Scotty get my message?"

Spock quickly told him what events had transpired while he was on board the *Enterprise*. Kirk heard him out, then, leaning heavily on the desk, not looking at the Vulcan, said, "We've got one more job, Spock. We must disable this ship. We have to be sure that there is no way it can fight effectively or be able to communicate with the rest of the force."

He knew his first officer's eyes were on him. He could almost see that mind quickly sifting the information, seeking all alternatives. Then the answer, "Agreed, Captain, but the odds for our longevity are not great should we succeed." Kirk smiled in spite of himself but said nothing. Realizing he was going to get no answer, Spock continued, "It will be impossible for you to do anything. You must return to the command control and continue with the invasion. I shall attempt to disrupt various circuits which should cause some difficulty in navigation." Kirk turned to look at his friend, half expecting to see the smile he heard in the voice. As usual, the Vulcan mask was covering the inner feelings and there was no betrayal on the face.

"Spock, I know this is unnecessary, but...be careful!"

"Understood, Captain."

Kirk put his hand on Spock's shoulder for a brief moment. The Vulcan disliked the contact but he knew the depth of Kirk's emotion and allowed the comfort that his captain found in that gesture. Then Kirk was gone. A few minutes later, Spock slipped out and headed for Engineering, leaving his two guards lying quietly in a secluded corner. Twenty minutes later, he was back in the commander's quarters and settled himself on the floor, looking very much as though he had been put there at the end of a fist. Very shortly thereafter, he heard a pounding down the corridor, the door was flung open, and security men poured in, followed by the commander.

"You see, Commander, he is not..." the voice broke off as all eyes went to the figure lying in the corner.

"Perhaps you neglected to look on the floor, Captain," came Kirk's voice. "I told you I had left him in my cabin. I did not say exactly where or in what condition. He obviously has not gone very far. However, since you seem so eager to know his exact whereabouts..." Here Spock felt himself being roughly pulled to his feet and decided to peek at the proceedings. He discovered that Kirk was in the process of pushing him, hard, into the arms of the astonished security officer. He fell flat and put a little of his own strength into the drop, causing himself and the victim of Kirk's wrath to land in a heap on the far side of the room. "I suggest," continued Kirk, "that you assign yourself to his care and bring him to Command Control where we can both keep our eyes on him." Kirk turned and left the room without looking back, followed by most of the other men. The security officer untangled himself and hauled Spock to his feet. The two of them made it to their destination but Spock did everything in his power to hinder progress. When they finally did arrive, he was shoved into a corner and the guard moved off a few feet, preparing to stand watch over him.

"Commander! Sensors are picking up the approach of many ships."

Spock thought he detected a bit of fear in that voice. "There would be a lot more fear," he thought to himself, "when they went to engage their weapons." That would blow out the main navigation circuits, leaving the ship totally blind.

"Call battle stations," ordered Kirk, with a sense of irony. No doubt his fellow Starfleet officers were ordering the same thing.

A deafening siren sounded, putting Kirk's teeth on edge. You certainly knew when alert status was called on this ship. He glanced over at Spock but he was still slumped in his corner.

"Your prisoner looks as though he will remain quiet for a while, Captain," he commented to his security officer. "I suggest you have more important duties elsewhere. If he attempts to take over the ship I think there are enough people here that we will be able to subdue him somehow."

Due to his complexion, the security officer did not flush but Kirk could feel his anger and humiliation. He heard the snickering from around the room but did nothing to quell it. The officer turned on his heel and stormed out.

Immediately, all attention was on the viewing screen. Sailing in front of a large number of smaller ships was the *Enterprise*. Kirk's heart leapt. Good old Scotty...he had done it!

"Commander," came the question. "Shall we open fire? The superior force is ours. They only have one remaining starship. We can cut it down immediately."

Kirk looked quickly at Spock. Although he was lying motionless in the corner, Kirk thought he detected the slightest movement of his head. Did that mean yes? Had Spock really managed to disrupt the ship somehow? It seemed to be functioning properly.

"Commander?" The request came again. Kirk still hesitated. The command ship had the capability of destroying the *Enterprise*. He just couldn't bring himself to give that order.

But the decision was not necessary, for the *Enterprise* fired first - clean miss! Kirk fervently hoped the miss was deliberate. If not, Chekov was going to have to find a new job! Then a junior officer panicked and fired back. All hell broke loose...the screens dropped, the sensors stopped operating, the ship started veering to starboard, out of control - the viewscreens went dead. The command ship was totally helpless.

Suddenly, it rocked violently from the burst of a photon torpedo. Debris was everywhere. "Bull's eye, Mr. Chekov," thought Kirk. "You have your job back." Suddenly he was aware of someone grabbing him from behind. He automatically resisted and was lifted right off his feet. A second later the top of the command console, about five hundred pounds of wires and heavy materials, crashed onto the spot where he had been standing. Looking up, he found himself being held tightly in Spock's arms. Another loud crash, and they were flung against the wall, Spock attempting, not very successfully, to cushion the worst of the impact. Dazed, Kirk saw red blood mixing with green. Funny, he wasn't conscious of being hurt, but must have hit, or been hit, by something.

A third barrage. Jawl turned to his commander in a panic and his jaw dropped. His leader was in the arms of the stranger who had come aboard a few hours before, and they were both disappearing in the sparkle of a transporter beam. Stunned, he realized that the glorious invasion was finished before it had begun. His cry of anguish was interrupted by the crashing of another phaser hit. It was the last thing he ever heard.



"I think we have them, Doctor," said Scotty, fiddling with the controls, MacNeil working alongside of him. "At least we have one of them." The figure materializing was doing so only on one pad. As it solidified, they discovered Kirk clutched tightly in Spock's arms and there appeared to be blood everywhere. McCoy hit the intercom: "Sickbay, medical emergency, Transporter Room!"

Awakened from a troubled sleep, McCoy's nurse grabbed the needed supplies and headed down the corridor. By the time she arrived in the transporter room, Scotty and McCoy had separated the Captain and First Officer and were, along with MacNeil and some security officers, doing their best to make them comfortable.

"Nurse, over here!" ordered McCoy. Spock managed to indicate that the Captain should be treated first. Kirk, badly injured by the impact into the wall, and the flying debris in Command Control, was slumped in the arms of Scotty and MacNeil. She stopped dead when she discovered who it was needing treatment. She couldn't believe her eyes...it couldn't possibly be those two again! "Nurse," snapped McCoy, "quickly, he may be dying!"

She handed him the kit, he selected one of the instruments and the hiss of the hypodermic sounded around the small room. "All right," he said, momentarily satisfied, "let's get them to Sickbay."

The journey was not long but for McCoy it seemed forever. Although Spock showed no outward signs of distress, he had received the worst of the shock caused by the torpedo and was fighting to cover the great waves of dizziness that threatened to leave him crumpled in the corridor. Kirk was unconscious.

Once again they were back in their beds. The nurse was assisting Dr. M'Benga who was trying to stop the flow of blood from several large wounds but the sheet that Spock was lying on was quickly turning green and there was a growing pile of discarded sheets, also stained green, lying on the floor beside them. Scotty was trying to help McCoy. They had Kirk on a diagnostic bed.

"The Captain...?" asked Spock in a faint whisper.

"Bad concussion, broken arm, lots of cuts and bruising. I think he'll live." A groan from the opposite bed seemed to support M'Benga's statement. Kirk opened his eyes. It seemed to dawn slowly on him where he was. "Bones, is that you? Scotty...? Where's Mr. Spock?"

"Spock's here, Jim," answered McCoy. "Dr. M'Benga is treating him now."

"Spock's here...but we were on the Zenian command ship! I remember the attack! Scotty, why aren't you on the bridge? What's happening?"

"Easy, Captain," laughed McCoy. "You are outranked on this ship. Admiral Komack is commanding at the moment."

"Admiral Komack!" echoed Kirk.

"Aye," said Scotty. "And the Zenian command ship has been completely destroyed. The rest of the invasion force is scattered and being pursued. There is little chance they will make it home and none at all that they shall repeat their little folly in the near future."

"As for the near future, the two of you are staying right here," interrupted McCoy. "You are hurt and exhausted and..." Seeing the look of utter confusion on his nurse's face, he continued, "...now for an introduction. Nurse Cavendish, I would like to present the Captain of the *Enterprise*, James T. Kirk, and our First Officer, Mr. Spock."

She stared in astonishment for a few minutes, then threw her instruments on the floor, turned to McCoy and said quietly, but with great finality, "Doctor, I quit! When we return to Starbase Nine, I am requesting a transfer to some planet which is quiet, life is predictable, and peace is the order of the day." Without a backward glance, she left the room.

McCoy looked after her, thunderstruck. What the devil had brought that on? Kirk chuckled and looked at Spock who managed to raise his eyebrows and say, "Your bedside manner seems to be somewhat lacking with your staff, Doctor." McCoy started to pick up the bait when Kirk interrupted.

"I'm sorry, Bones, but I can't take that right now. I want three things. One, to get cleaned up. Two, to become a human captain again. And three, I want to sleep!"

"Agreed, Captain," said Spock. "I, too, would find some benefit in occupying the same place for a short period of time."

"Sounds sensible," said McCoy, who left to get the antidote to reverse the effect of the Zenian conversion. When he returned, Kirk was out cold. He injected the antidote, cleaned all the cuts, set his arm, and drew some covers over the Captain. Going to Spock he assisted M'Benga in closing several gaping wounds and giving a precautionary transfusion of thick, green blood. With the major surgery finished and sensing McCoy's need to be alone with his friends, M'Benga excused himself. McCoy fussed about a few minutes more, injecting the antidote, adding a thermal sheet to the bed to allow for the Vulcan's sensitivity to cold, especially now that he was injured. Satisfying himself that both men were comfortable, he started to leave the room, then turned and said, "Spock."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Thank you...for taking care of him."

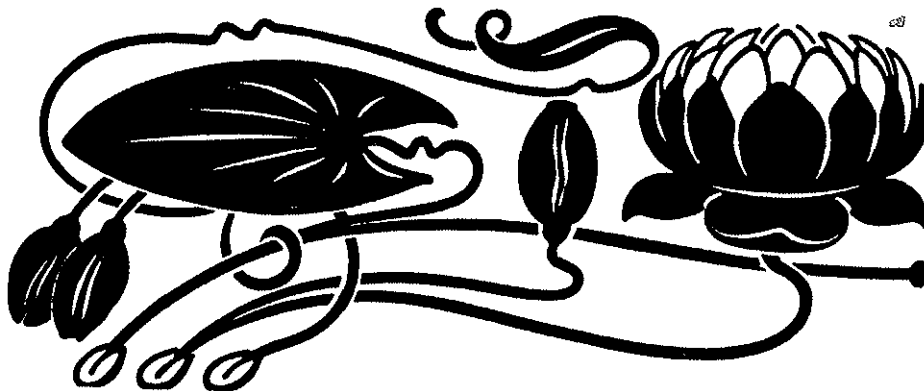
"Please, Doctor. Understand that there was no way I could have let Jim die, for you see, I knew it was inevitable that I return to this ship and to you. Returning without the Captain would have made life unbearable."

"I don't believe a word of that, Spock. I think you are a sentimentalist under that thick hide. Whether or not you like the fact, you have my thanks."

Dark eyes gazed into blue ones...then they turned away and looked at the man lying across the room. For a long moment they stayed fixed on Kirk's face. Fleeting, a naked love shone, then the mask closed and Spock was once again looking up at the doctor.

McCoy shuffled his feet, a bit embarrassed at being witness to an emotion the Vulcan so carefully hid from the world. Spock was aware of his discomfort and a very slight smile showed at the corners of his mouth. Then he looked away and said in such a quiet voice that McCoy almost imagined he had heard it...

"You're welcome, Doctor."





Reckoning

He had never moved so fast in his life. Kirk's words were still hanging in the air: "Andorian...attacked... Deck 5...Security..." Between the command chair and the turbolift doors, Spock had Scotty on his way to the Bridge, and had Uhura contact Security and Sickbay - her voice was cut off in mid-sentence as the turbolift doors shut. The short descent seemed to take forever.

Endless visions swept through Spock's mind. Kirk had said "Andorian" - had he meant more than one? What had happened to the one who had attacked the captain? Was he dead? Had he managed to kill Kirk? Dread welled up as unanswered questions tumbled over each other.

The doors had not completely opened before Spock was pounding down the corridor. As he rounded the bend, he saw two figures. The Andorian was closest to him, lying unmoving on his back. Spock didn't take the time to see if he was alive or dead. He hurdled the prone body and dropped to his knees beside Kirk. The back of the captain's uniform was stained with blood. Gently, Spock rolled him onto his side. As he was moved, a slight bubbling breath escaped Kirk's lips. Spock almost sobbed with relief. He balanced Kirk against his knees and tore the back of Kirk's uniform in half. Bright-red blood bubbled out of a deep wound in Kirk's back. Spock was not familiar with such injuries, but from the sound of it, Kirk's lungs must be involved. He applied as much pressure as he dared with a patch of Kirk's torn uniform. Kirk's body, normally so strong, now was a limp rag propped up against the Vulcan. His face was pale and damp, his breathing ragged and shallow as he went deeper into shock.

Spock felt panic welling up. Kirk was dying in his arms, and he was powerless to prevent it. He put more pressure behind his hand, and the flow of blood practically ceased. Kirk's breathing gradually grew more shallow and his face more white.

Spock vaguely heard the security guards arrive. His voice sounded far away as he gave his orders. They carried the Andorian away.

There was still no sign of McCoy. Spock remained beside his captain, cursing the doctor, helpless terror taking command. He shifted his cramped position, and Kirk rolled toward him, causing another flow of blood to come bubbling over Spock's hand. He repositioned the pressure pad and pushed down firmly as he braced Kirk's body against his.

"McCoy," he said fiercely under his breath, "where are you?"

McCoy finally came. His quiet competence did nothing to soothe Spock's anger, which was fueled by his panic over Kirk. Blue eyes met hostile brown ones over the still form of their friend. McCoy was surprised. Rarely did Spock show what he was feeling; never had the doctor seen such barely controlled anger.

"What took you so long?"

McCoy placed a pressure pack over the wound and sealed it before he looked again at Spock, still kneeling, supporting the weight of Kirk's body.

"I was with your father, Spock."

"His position isn't grave, the captain's is!"

McCoy leaned back on his heels, his unspoken question answered. Spock had admitted that Jim Kirk was more important to him than his father - it was a point in the relationship between father and son that he hadn't thought of before. McCoy got up as the medical team arrived, and supervised Kirk's transfer from the corridor floor to the stretcher. He looked at Spock as the Vulcan slowly rose to his feet. "I'll let you know his condition as soon as I can."

"That won't be necessary, Doctor. I shall accompany you to the Sickbay."

McCoy looked at him curiously. Sarek had been lying helpless in Sickbay for almost twenty-four hours, and

McCoy hadn't been able to get Spock anywhere near him. Now he wouldn't let Kirk go alone. But McCoy didn't have time to worry about one emotionally mixed-up Vulcan. He shrugged as he turned away.

"Suit yourself."



Spock stood grimly at the end of the bed as McCoy worked quietly and efficiently. The verdict was in: Kirk was badly hurt; it was only sheer luck that he wasn't dead. As soon as McCoy finished, he moved back to Sarek, leaving Spock alone with his thoughts. They were jumbled as he looked down at Kirk lying so still and pale, the large covering around his chest keeping a steady pressure over his lungs and ribcage. As Spock stood looking at the most important man in his universe, he felt his anger rise again. For some senseless reason, he had almost lost Kirk. He would find out why if it was the last thing he did. He turned to go to the brig.

He had been surprised at McCoy's reaction to his refusal to consent to the operation. He had suspected McCoy had a one-track mind, and now he was sure of it. The doctor couldn't see that the danger to the *Enterprise*, the threat of the alien ship, the murder of the Tellerite Ambassador, and the attempted murder of the captain were more important than his father's life. McCoy could rarely see past his own little world. Spock's duty to Starfleet was clear, but his duty to Kirk was even more so. Sarek might die; that would have to be accepted. If Kirk had to die, he would find out why - even if he had to shatter every bone in the Andorian's body to discover the answer.

But he failed. He used every method he knew and learned nothing. The Andorian Ambassador knew nothing; Thelev revealed nothing. Spock returned discouraged to the bridge. There was something wrong, something glaringly wrong, and he couldn't put his finger on it. He leaned back in the command chair, his frustration threatening to surface.

Suddenly Kirk was there, hazel eyes and flashing grin, familiar actions eaking a hard lump lodge in the Vulcan's throat. All the vitality that made the man was present. The image of the dying figure fled from Spock's mind. Kirk was alive. Now maybe his father would live as well, maybe he would not have to live with his mother's condemnation. Spock went willingly, reassured by Kirk's bearing and manner that he was capable of command.

As the turbolift descended, Spock could feel McCoy's disapproval. He sighed quietly to himself. There was no way he could explain his relationship with his father - only a Vulcan could understand his actions. He kept his gaze on the far wall. Something about that alien ship was still bothering him, and he couldn't figure out what it was.

But it wasn't Spock's peculiar relationship with his father that was bothering McCoy, and it wasn't disapproval he was feeling, but resentment. Kirk had insisted that Sarek's life was more important than his own. Maybe in this instance it was - a war over Corridon would be very costly, and an ambassador might prevent it where a starship captain would be powerless. But what was bothering McCoy most was that once again Kirk was willingly risking his life for Spock - and what had Spock even done to deserve it? This was not the first time Kirk had done this - he had risked his career, gone against Starfleet orders for Spock. He had buried his grief over his brother because of what happened to Spock. Spock had deserted his captain for Leila and paradise, yet Kirk would still go out on a limb for him. McCoy had felt the familiar pang of resentment start when Kirk had insisted on going to the bridge. But Sarek would have died if he hadn't gone, and McCoy hadn't been able to refuse when certain death was the only alternative.

Then McCoy found himself battling the ship as well as the appalling odds against Sarek. When Christine Chapel came back ashen-faced to say that Scotty wasn't in command on the bridge, but was in engineering, with Kirk still in command, McCoy found himself operating in anger, cursing Kirk's foolishness and the abnormalities of the Vulcan physiology. As the difficulties increased, so did McCoy's anger. If Kirk died, it would be on his conscience. He transferred some of the blame to Spock. He knew he wouldn't be able to live with the guilt if he shouldered the blame alone.

Then it was over. Somehow he had done it; he had pulled Sarek through without killing Spock. He walked into the next room, trying to let his whirling emotions settle.

He didn't have time. Kirk walked in, pale and shaking. McCoy's anger stirred as he studied the hapless man in front of him. He ignored the instinct which told him that he should get the captain into bed instantly. He let the human struggle on, a part of him smouldering over the open concern and pride Kirk had shown the Vulcan, the other part silently condemning himself for letting Kirk continue his foolishness.

The collapse finally came. McCoy found no pleasure in it. Kirk had put up a good front, but it eventually could not be sustained. Kirk lay silent now, biting his lip as McCoy carefully took off his uniform. The large bandage had slipped, no longer affording the much-needed support. McCoy shook his head as he cautiously pulled Kirk up to readjust it. Kirk sat quietly, answering McCoy's questions in a monotone, too tired to put up any protest. McCoy finally gently pushed him back and pulled up some covers. He pressed home a hypo for the pain Kirk refused to admit to. He waited until Kirk was asleep, then checked on Sarek. He, too, was asleep - but it was a deep, healing

sleep, all vital signs strong.

As he turned, he met Spock's eyes - eyes full of accusation, of anger, of betrayal. He looked away. He had no defense; anything Spock wanted to say was well within the Vulcan's right. But Kirk was alive, and Sarek would live. His duty was done. If Spock felt he had been tricked, then so be it. It had been the only possible way of getting the operation done. That he had disagreed with Kirk didn't make things any easier to justify. That Kirk was once again willing to put his life on the line for Spock only made the distance between McCoy and Spock that much larger.



Spock was out of Sickbay the next day, but not before McCoy ran a complete physical, then another one. Both times he came up with the same result: blood production abnormal. He let Spock go, but got out all information on the Rigelian research. Nothing was recorded about abnormal blood production occurring after the drug wore off. McCoy switched off the computer and sat staring into space. He had been against using it, but had given in to "logic". He should have followed his instincts; he should never have listened to Spock.

Sarek continued to improve. He slept most of the time, or at least remained in a state closely resembling sleep. He started eating a little, which was an encouraging sign. McCoy had finally persuaded Amanda to leave Sarek and get some much-needed rest. Spock had escorted her to her quarters, McCoy sending him more to assure her that her son was all right than to make sure she would arrive safely.

McCoy kept Kirk sedated. The knife wound was healing with no complications, but the captain had been exhausted, and McCoy wanted him to get all the rest he could. He knew he had made a mistake telling Kirk he could be out in two days. The captain would insist on going, ready or not.



James Kirk finished the first meal he had been allowed and swung the tray away, carefully stretching his arms. The pain in his back was almost gone. He carefully moved his legs over the side of the bed and hopped onto the floor just as McCoy walked into the room.

"Going somewhere, Captain?" he asked, his eyebrows on the rise.

Kirk peered at him, trying to figure out if he was being serious or not. "As a matter of fact, I was. You said I could be out of here in two days if I obeyed your orders. I did, so I'm going."

"Back to bed, Jim. I'm going to run a complete physical before you go anywhere."

Muttering under his breath, Kirk climbed back onto the bed.

"On your stomach."

He glared at McCoy before he rolled over, cradling his chin in his hands. He lay totally passive under McCoy's probing hands, tensing only slightly as the doctor sprayed some icy substance onto his back. He heard the swishing of the door, but paid little attention to it.

"Deep breath."

He filled his lungs, trying to ignore the flicker of pain that met the movement.

"Okay, let it go - slowly."

In the background, he heard Sarek speaking and Spock answering. It must have been his first officer who had come in.

"Breathe in again."

"Bones, I don't..."

"You want to get out of here?"

Kirk breathed in. It hurt less this time. McCoy left him so long that he could feel himself turning purple. Finally he looked around to find that McCoy had Spock lying on a diagnostic table.

"Bones!" It was practically a squeak as he tried not to let any air out.

McCoy looked over in some surprise. "Oh, sorry, Jim, you can let it go."

Kirk rolled over, curiosity overtaking annoyance as he watched McCoy switch on the diagnostic panel over Spock's head. He swung off his bed and walked over to stand beside the doctor.

"What's wrong?"

McCoy didn't take his eyes off the panel. "Nothing I can put my finger on. His blood production rate isn't back to normal - a result of that blasted Rigelian drug."

"Why did you let him go back on duty?" Kirk didn't try to hide the worry in his voice, causing both McCoy and Spock to look at him sharply. He swallowed hard, then looked at McCoy. His voice was softer. "Why?"

"No reason not to..."

"I am perfectly able to function, Captain. The drug is causing no debilitating effects..."

"Bones?"

"As far as I can tell, he's telling the truth - not that I can trust what he says...or you either, for that

matter." Ignoring the face Kirk made, he went on. "Now back to bed, Captain. I haven't finished with you yet."

"May I return to duty, Doctor?"

"All right, Spock. Let me know if you start to feel any ill effects."

With a polite nod to his father and a lingering glance at his captain, Spock left.

Kirk boosted himself up on the bed and sat looking thoughtfully at the closed door. McCoy seemed to be keeping a very careful check on Spock, something he wouldn't normally do unless he really was concerned.

"You are worried about Spock, Captain?"

Sarek's voice startled Kirk. The Vulcan Ambassador was normally so silent that, although Kirk had spent two days in the Sickbay with him, he often forgot the Vulcan's presence.

He smiled slightly. "Yes, Ambassador, I am a little..."

"It would be illogical if Spock didn't report to his medical officer if he was feeling any ill effects from the operation."

Kirk looked at the Vulcan in silence. He knew it would be logical for Spock to report to McCoy - he also knew Spock probably wouldn't. But there was no way he could explain that to Spock's father. Sarek saw Spock as a Vulcan, not taking into account his son's human half, which made him the unique person he was. He was spared an answer as McCoy came back in.

Another icy blast of spray almost took his breath away. McCoy grinned as he watched Kirk's expression.

"Cold, huh? Don't worry, it won't last long. It's a seal for that knife wound. It's healing well, but it was awfully deep...the muscles are still weak where they were separated. That pain you felt shows your lung isn't completely healed either. I'm going to let you out, Jim, but I want you to promise to take it easy this time. Provided you don't try a forty-yard dash, I think you'll be all right."

After he got dressed, Kirk walked over to Sarek. "I'm glad to see that you're getting better, sir."

Sarek bowed his head slightly. "Thanks to the skill of your surgeon, Captain, I seem to be making a satisfactory recovery. However, I feel it will be a few days before I am allowed to resume my duties..."

"I'd agree with that evaluation," said McCoy, who had come up behind them unnoticed. "Ambassador, you need more sleep. Jim - out!"

Kirk grinned at the Vulcan's upraised eyebrow so like that of his son. He had seen many of Spock's mannerisms in Sarek during the past couple of days and found himself wondering if Sarek was aware of them - aware of Spock's unstated respect and admiration of a man whose expectations he found it impossible to live up to. He also wondered if Spock was aware of them. Probably not - there was still a deep, underlying tension whenever Spock came to visit his father. Kirk had tried to find a way to talk to Sarek about his son, but the Vulcan's reserve discouraged it. While it had been easy to talk to Ananda, he found it impossible to talk to Sarek. Smiling a little, he said he would come by later, and escaped from the Sickbay before McCoy had a chance to change his mind and keep him in bed.



The black ship sat motionless, almost invisible against the velvet black of space. She had been there for several days, hovering in silence, a sinister object, watching and waiting.

Finally, the waiting was over. The small scout ship they had been expecting arrived. The large ship left the black void and warped out among the stars.

A group of humanoids gathered in the main briefing room. Their appearance was more feline than human. Their skin was a tawny color, and their hair grew thick and shaggy, closely resembling a lion's mane. As they talked, their sharp canine teeth were exposed. What was most remarkable about their appearance was their eyes. All possessed the same green, gold-flecked color, with the oversize slit pupil of the cat. Their eyes were slanted, and reflected light made the green in them stand out brightly. Like the females of their species, who were so highly prized at the slave market, they more closely resembled animals than civilized sentient beings. They were small and of slight build; their movements were graceful and quick. They were untamed, beholden to no man, members of no organization. They were outsiders. They were Orions.

The man at the end of the table stood, his eyes catching the light and flashing almost neon. There was a slight hissing sound to his voice, a trait common to the Orion speech.

"The mission to disrupt the Babel Conference has failed in its initial stages. The *Enterprise* outmaneuvered us, and our attack ship was destroyed. D'Trel is no longer sending out communications..."

The gathered men glanced sideways at each other. D'Trel was the bloodmate to D'Tra, the speaker. It was the sworn oath of bloodmates to kill those who destroyed their union.

"...we must assume that he, too, has died. Other attack vessels are on their way with the same orders as the *Dustrial*. They will intercept and try to destroy the *Enterprise* before she reaches Babel. We shall be ready should they fail yet again."

Green eyes glowed as they swept the room. No questions were asked, none were necessary. All knew what was expected of them.

The fighting forces of the Orions were formed in a way vastly different from those of other races. Theirs was not a service under a chain of command, but separate units loosely connected. Only the ship's commander was bound by any authority outside his ship - and even that was often tenuous. The men under his command were fiercely loyal to only one man: their commander. It was he who chose them, he who trained them - with him they divided the spoils of war and pirateering, their success or destruction in his hands. It was the dream of many of Orion's youth to be picked for the elite forces. Those who were selected were the best Orion had to offer. All their lives they had lived on the legends and exploits of the Orion raiders; their loyalty was assured from the start. Each ship was only as strong as its commander made it - each ship and crew wanted to be the strongest in the fleet, and each carried its own pride.

The chosen raiders roamed far from their planet, constantly on the move, looking for new prey, for plunder and gain. Infrequently, they would return to Orion to resupply the ship, and to take on new recruits if their number had fallen. New orders would come to them occasionally via small scout ships those few times it became necessary for the normally solitary ships to bank together for a show of strength. It was here that the ships' leaders were especially important - they were the ones who had to work together. It was here that the strength of their leadership showed, for they had to share the spoils of war with others, something alien to their instincts. It was here that the crews must fully obey the orders of their commander.



Jim Kirk bumped into Spock as they arrived at Sickbay. He grinned at his first officer. "This is getting a little boring, isn't it?"

Spock's eyebrows rose. "It does seem repetitious, seeing as the good doctor's findings are the same each day."

Chuckling, Kirk led the way into the sickbay. They greeted Amanda and Sarek, who were just finishing dinner. Kirk noted with some concern the fact that Spock still visibly withdrew in the presence of his father.

McCoy came in a few minutes later. He quickly moved Kirk and Spock into the next room. Kirk sat on one of the beds and watched McCoy work on Spock. Silence ruled except for the bleeps from the scanner. Finally, McCoy stood back.

"It's worse, Spock. Your blood production rate is way off. I think you'd better stay here overnight. I want to start you on some drug therapy, and I want you where I can monitor your reactions."

There was no argument from Spock, and that concerned Kirk. Normally, the Vulcan would have put up a healthy resistance. That there was none proved that Spock admitted he was not feeling very well.

McCoy's check on Kirk was brief. All his readings were satisfactory, and the healing was coming along well. Kirk was pulling his uniform shirt back on when McCoy asked him if he had time for a drink.

"I'd like one," said Kirk with a smile. "It's been too long since last time."

McCoy smiled slightly at Kirk's unspoken statement of his fondness for his evenings spent with McCoy over a bottle of the doctor's favorite brandy.

A friendly silence fell over the two men as they savored the fine old brandy, the atmosphere warm and comfortable. Kirk swirled the liqueur in his glass, watching the alternating sparkle and shadow as the amber fluid caught the light.

McCoy watched him for a few minutes, looking at the familiar planes and shadows of his face, the youthful lines scarcely marred by the burden of command. Kirk glanced up and caught McCoy's eyes.

"You're worried about Spock, aren't you?"

McCoy looked down, unable to meet the tense gaze. "Yes, some. I don't like it when that crazy Vulcan pops up with something abnormal. I have enough trouble trying to figure out how he runs when he's okay."

"Is it serious?"

McCoy looked up. "No...no, I don't think so. Not yet, anyway. The drug I used was made for Rigelians, not Vulcans. Spock's having some reactions which weren't noted in the Rigelian research. His blood count isn't good, but I'm fairly sure I can rectify the problem. He'll have to stay in Sickbay for a few days so I can monitor him."

Kirk nodded. "It might be a good idea if he wasn't with his father..."

"Yeah, I figured that." McCoy had noticed the strain when Sarek and Spock were together. He looked at Kirk for a long while, a question on his face.

"Okay, Bones, what else is bothering you?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, come on. You've admitted to sensing a tension between Sarek and Spock - and I've noticed the same thing between you and Spock when I'm around. Don't you think you should get it off your chest?"

McCoy's face reddened a little. But it had been bugging him, so he might as well get it out into the open. "All right. When the Andorian attacked you, you were badly hurt, and you knew it..."

Kirk nodded, but didn't say anything.

"...why did you call Spock, not me?"

Kirk looked a little surprised. The answer seemed so obvious to him - but reflecting on it, he could see that McCoy might not be able to see it so easily.

"Bones, your duty is to save lives - mine, at the moment, is to get the *Enterprise* and her passengers safely to Babel. So far, not much has gone right on this trip. When I was attacked, I didn't know if it was an isolated incident or if things were being disrupted shipwide. Calling Spock insured that the ship would be on instant alert - all ambassadors covered by security, all department heads called on duty - and I knew you would be notified. At this point, my life was not of top priority, much as I'm attached to it. I knew Spock would go by Starfleet order of importance - and that you might not."

McCoy nodded glumly, feeling the familiar pang which always hit when Kirk, pointedly or not, showed how much he valued and depended on Spock. He knew Kirk's analysis was a good one from Starfleet's point of view, but he could only see how close he had come once again to losing Kirk, and each time hurt worse than the last.

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense." He finished his brandy in a big gulp. Kirk put his glass on the desk, sensing that whatever camaraderie they shared would be lost for the night. McCoy would never be a military man, he would never really understand about Spock and what they shared that was so different from what he shared with McCoy. The doctor's life revolved around a different set of standards. Kirk knew that those different standards would always hold McCoy and Spock apart, that their shared friendship with him would bind them together, probably only as long as he stayed between them. He got up and walked around the desk, putting his hand on McCoy's shoulder.

"Goodnight, Bones. Thanks for the drink."

McCoy sat staring at the closed door, and thinking about the man - almost young enough to be his son - who was gradually becoming the most important person in his life. He had been badly hurt once before when he let his emotions start to rule his judgment - and he would have to be very careful not to let it happen again.



The *Enterprise* warped steadily toward Babel. Tension still ran high among the delegates, but there was no more open hostility. All the ambassadors had security men detailed to be with them at all times, and each ambassadorial party also had security guards. They were there not only to protect, but to prevent any further attacks from within the ranks of the delegates themselves.

While Spock was in Sickbay, Scotty became Kirk's indispensable right-hand man. A great deal of Kirk's time was taken in appeasing various ambassadors. He found that he tired very quickly, and McCoy was breathing down his neck making sure that he didn't overdo it. This left Scotty virtually running the *Enterprise* by himself. When Kirk wasn't with the delegates, he was in his quarters sleeping. Scotty didn't bother him with any details of ship routine unless he asked, figuring Kirk had enough problems without that. When Kirk tried to thank him, Scotty shrugged it off, a little embarrassed.

When he had time, Kirk would sit with Spock, finding their quiet conversation relaxing. With Spock, he always found he could share some of the pressures of command. Some of the crushing burden could be eased, if only for a short time. McCoy left them alone, knowing this was something he could not share. He fought the resentment he felt when he saw them together, but was not always entirely successful.



Kirk's back was aching and he could feel the familiar exhaustion gradually claiming him. He rubbed his hand over his eyes, trying to force himself to be alert. When he took his hand down, Scotty was standing at his side.

"Captain..." He didn't need to go on. Kirk knew he had reached the end of his reserves.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott. You have the con. I'll be in my quarters if you need me." A smile warmed Scotty's eyes as he watched Kirk leave for the turbolift. After the doors had shut, he settled himself in the command chair, ready to pass the few hours left to end-of-shift.



"Mr. Scott - sensors show four ships on an intercept course with the *Enterprise*."

"Configuration, Mr. Chekov?"

"Unfamiliar, sir, but they resemble the Orion ship we fought a few days ago."

"Anything on communications, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, Mr. Scott. I'm hailing on all frequencies, but get no response."

Reluctantly, Scotty hit the intercom for Kirk's quarters. He knew how exhausted his captain was, but this required his attention.

Kirk answered rather groggily. He had just dropped into a deep sleep when Scotty called. In the short time it took the engineer to relate the newest trouble, he completely woke up. "I'll be right there, Scotty. Keep trying to hail them, and put the ship on battle readiness. Kirk out."

The sirens and lights of red alert were sounding throughout the ship as Kirk ducked into Sickbay. "McCoy, I need Spock. Can you let him go?"

Spock was already changing out of Sickbay fatigues, and within seconds was accompanying Kirk to the bridge. He took the scanners, and Chekov went back to navigation.

"Screens are on full, sir," said Sulu. "They're still coming straight at us."

Kirk glanced at Spock, who was glued to his scanner. "Anything, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. These ships are the same design as the Orion ship we destroyed. I would suspect that their mission is essentially the same."

Kirk swung around to Uhura. "How long before the *Lexington* and *Excalibur* get here?"

"It should be soon, Captain. Starfleet diverted them from their regular patrols as soon as we contacted them after our last fight with the Orions. Their estimated arrival time was three days, and it's been almost seventy hours now. I have tried hailing frequencies, but get no response. They're still out of range."

"Spock, anything on long range scanners?"

"Negative, Captain - I only pick up the four alien vessels."

Kirk sat in silence, his eyes on the viewing screen, his fingers absently tracing his lips. They were in deep trouble. He suspected that these ships had the same orders as the last, and that they would be willing to die to accomplish their goal. The *Enterprise* was outnumbered four to one - odds difficult enough even when the other side intended to survive.

He pushed the intercom. "Captain to crew. We are in for a rough ride. I want all back-up systems on emergency standby, and relief personnel to be at their stations, ready to take over immediately if necessary. Security personnel, double your numbers assigned to the ambassadorial parties. Be ready for any sign of hostile activity. Kirk out."

"They're breaking formation, Captain," said Spock, eyes still pressed to his sensors. "They will probably come at us from different directions, and try to catch us in a crossfire..."

Again Kirk hit the intercom. "Bridge to engineering."

"Scott here, Captain."

"Scotty, I'm going to need every bit of power your engines can give - shields, phasers, warp-drive - we're going to have to fight."

"Aye, Captain - you'll have everything we can give you."

"Good. Kirk out."

Spock's prediction was correct. The small ships started their attacks at random, coming at the *Enterprise* at their top warp speed, not giving her a chance to keep her forward shields to any one ship. Their lightning speed made it next to impossible to accurately return fire; the Federation starship managed to hit with a glancing blow only occasionally, while she was continually rocked with full blasts.

Working desperately, Spock and Chekov fed data into the computers - and finally one Orion ship was destroyed by the direct hit of a photon torpedo. Now it was three to one.

"Shields two and five have buckled, Captain."

"Emergency power, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan hit the switch, watched momentarily, then turned to Kirk. "It's no use, sir - reserve power is not sufficient to raise them. The ship's reserves are being drained by all systems remaining on full power."

"All right. Mr. Sulu, evasive maneuvers...we've got to start ducking and running at warp speed."

The *Enterprise* dodged and turned, sometimes successfully evading fire, other times rocking violently from a direct hit on weakened or fallen shields. Medical teams were running full out; with the ship's shielding no longer able to protect at full power, there were not just bumps and bruises, but critical injuries and deaths.

The bridge crew worked at peak efficiency; as often as they were flung from their seats by repeated bombardments, they were instantly back, returning fire, darting away from the next onslaught. One attacking ship made repeated passes at the area of the bridge, and systems were beginning to short out from the destructive energy hurled at them. Suddenly, part of the helm exploded, showering flames and sparks high into the air, burning Sulu's hand badly.

"Get down to Sickbay!" Kirk had already taken Sulu's place before the helmsman had made it to the turbolift. The barrage came again, flinging Kirk and Chekov out of their seats. Dizzying pain swept through Kirk as he was isaped on the edge of the helm console. He could hardly get back to his feet. He could feel something warm on his

back, but took no time to speculate as to what it was.

"Captain, I have radio contact with the *Excalibur*."

"Tell them to get here as fast as they can, Lieutenant! Chekov, fire with everything you've got left, try to keep those shields safe. We've only got to hold on a few minutes longer..."

The bridge was starting to blur, as fierce pain swept through his chest. "Spock, take over the helm..."

He stumbled back into the command chair, and the Vulcan slid into the vacated seat. Under his guidance, the *Enterprise* continued to dip and swerve, maneuvering in a course toward the rapidly approaching *Excalibur*. Kirk fought to stay conscious, fought to keep his mind clear in order to help Chekov. Another of their torpedoes slowed the oncoming attack of the second ship.

Suddenly, the ship in front of them exploded in a blinding light, and the *Excalibur* flashed past their screens in pursuit of the now-fleeing Orions.

"Captain, the *Lexington* is within range..." Uhura's voice was strained, but the note of triumph in it couldn't be hidden.

Kirk leaned back, his face paling with the movement. "Mr. Leslie, relieve Mr. Spock. Chekov, have the phasers on standby, but be ready. Kirk to engineering."

"Aye, sir."

"Ease back on the engines, Mr. Scott, I think we've made it."

"Not a moment too soon, Captain - they're red hot. But we'll keep a little reserve ready, just in case."

"Good, Scotty - Kirk out. Mr. Leslie, conserve power as much as possible. Mr. Chekov, plot a heading to Babel. Let the other ships catch up with us when they've finished. I think we've done all we can for the moment."

"Aye, Captain."

As Kirk wrapped his arm around his chest, trying to ease the agony of breathing, Spock appeared beside him. "Captain, I think you'd better get to Sickbay - the back of your uniform is covered with blood..."

Kirk nodded. In the heat of action, he had tried to ignore the blinding pain in his body. Now that the danger had passed, it was bearing down hard.

As the turbolift started its descent, Kirk was finding it more and more difficult to breathe. When he tried anything deeper than a shallow breath, searing pain shot through his ribcage. He turned to Spock, but it was too late. He gasped for air, but none came. The pain doubled him as he fought desperately for oxygen. He grabbed for Spock, his hands raking at the Vulcan's arms as he slowly crumpled to the floor, fighting for his breath, fighting for his life - and losing the battle for both. He lay there, body aching, arms spread wide, the sound of his desperate struggle for air filling the turbolift.

Spock hit the intercom. "McCoy, medical emergency...the Captain...in the turbolift...Deck 5." He dropped to his knees, helpless to do anything. The terrible gasping grew louder, more demanding.

A young medic was standing at the turbolift doors when they opened. His face paled when he saw Kirk thrashing against Spock's restraining hands. He shrank a little from Spock's icy glance.

"Where's McCoy?"

"He's tied up in engineering, sir...he'll get here as soon as he can."

"Well, don't just stand there - help me!"

The young man dropped to his knees, putting his fingers on Kirk's pulse. It was racing. He got a respirator from the small cart standing in the corridor and tried to fix it on Kirk's face, but the man's thrashing made it next to impossible.

Kirk's breathing worsened. His face was quickly turning a deeper red as he fought for air. With Spock's total strength bearing down, they finally held him steady enough to get the respirator in place. Kirk's struggles were almost turning into convulsions. The medic seemed at a loss as to what to do next.

Suddenly, McCoy was there. He took one look at Kirk, then turned to Nurse Chapel.

"Pneumothorax - needle!"

Spock knew he wasn't one to create illusions under duress, but he could have sworn that the needle McCoy held was at least a foot long. McCoy ripped Kirk's uniform shirt open and slid the needle in through his ribs about four inches down. Air and blood whooshed out of the chest cavity.

"Oxygen! No, get me the oxyo-stimulator. We've got to keep oxygen going to his brain!" The respirator was pulled off and a mask fitted over Kirk's face, as he continued his struggle for air. Spock knelt helplessly as the fight for life went on.

"Come on, we've got to get him to surgery. He's ruptured the muscles in his chest...one lung's collapsed and the other is going. We've got real trouble... Oh, damn, that knife wound in his back's opened again. Spock, why the hell did you let him stay on the bridge?"

"Where were you when he needed you?"

McCoy threw Spock an angry glance - then he was gone, following the medic and stretcher that were charging down the hall, McCoy's top medical team running alongside it.

Spock followed more slowly, reaching Sickbay as the routine procedures prior to surgery were quickly completed. He stood silently by Kirk's stretcher, his stomach tied in a hard knot. McCoy's manner was strictly professional now, but his pale face told Spock that the doctor was as scared as he was. Within minutes, the surgical team was ready, and Kirk was wheeled off.

Spock stood frozen by the now empty space where Kirk's stretcher had been. A tiny pool of red lay at his feet, the life-blood of a man who had given him a reason to live instead of exist. Now that man was dying, and McCoy's grim expression told Spock that he might not be able to do anything to prevent it.

"You are showing emotion, Spock."

Strong disapproval sounded in his father's voice. Spock was momentarily startled - then his stricken eyes met those which so often disapproved his actions. This time, Spock knew he could not defend the naked emotion he was displaying. If he spoke, there would be no way he could cover the icy anger his father's words had caused. Taking a deep breath, he turned and walked out of Sickbay.



McCoy threw the blood-stained towel across the room. Six hours, and what good had it done? McCoy had gotten the collapsed lungs inflated again; he had sealed the ruptured chest muscles, and again closed the knife wound. He could replace the lost blood, he could supply the life-giving oxygen - but he didn't know if he could fight the deep shock that was draining Kirk's vital life-forces. A human body could take only so much before it gave up. Kirk had the spirit to live, but did he have the strength? Medically, McCoy had done everything possible - now he could only hope.

He sighed as he got to his feet and headed for the intensive care unit. Christine Chapel was there, gently sponging Kirk's face. She looked up as McCoy entered.

"Any change?"

She silently shook her head. The panel readings were dangerously low, and Kirk was still deeply unconscious. McCoy looked away, despair gripping him. All the odds were against Kirk's survival.



For the next days, Spock functioned in a void. He was again in command while his friend might be dying, and this time the probability was high that Kirk couldn't recover. Things had settled down among the passengers, their common danger binding them closer; but intermittent disputes still demanded a great deal of Spock's time.

The *Lexington* and *Excalibur* escorted the *Enterprise* the rest of the way to Babel, which gave Spock time to spend with Kirk he would not normally have had.

The strain on Spock was taking its toll. Hanging over his head every minute was the knowledge that Kirk was no better. Any spare minutes he had, which were few enough, he spent in Sickbay, in the small room where Kirk lay so silent, his vital signs read by machines outside the room, in order to allow him complete quiet. Only McCoy and Spock entered. Occasionally, Spock met the doctor - but no words were spoken. McCoy still blamed Spock for what had happened, and Spock knew that trying to reason with him was useless. Spock neither ate nor slept, but kept driving himself relentlessly, trying to keep the possibility of Kirk's dying at arm's length.

Throughout Spock's trials, one person watched him and worried about him, even though she was helpless to do anything for him. Amanda watched him as she had done for so many years on Vulcan, suffering silently as she saw the torture he was enduring.

Standard orbit around Babel had been achieved. Spock's duty had officially ended. He had been present as most of the delegates had beamed down. Only a few were left, and they were going to stay on board the *Enterprise* until the next day. His parents were among them. McCoy had released Sarek from Sickbay a few days earlier, but wanted to run a physical in the morning before he would let the Vulcan take up the exacting job of diplomacy.

Spock was sitting alone in Sickbay with Kirk, who had rallied somewhat during the past twenty-four hours. His life-readings were still dangerously low, but stable. Kirk started moving restlessly on the bed, as he had frequently in the past few hours. He was no longer deeply unconscious. Spock stood quickly, and held his shoulders with gentle firmness. He checked to make sure the tube was still attached to Kirk's arm.

"Hold still, Jim." Please, please, hold on! The restless movements stopped, but the eyes remained shut. Spock stood, his own eyes resting on the pale face, his mind seeing Kirk in action, commanding, teasing, laughing, lying face down, dying...

"No!"

Suddenly, he was aware of someone standing just inside the door. He struggled for control, but it was too late-

Amada had already seen him.

"Spock..."

She had never seen such torture on her son's face - such open and naked hurt. "You care for him a great deal, don't you?"

Spock stood frozen, the curtain he had constructed against a world he could not bear gradually failing. Mother and son stood as strangers.

"Spock, don't shut me out. You don't have to be alone." Her eyes went to the silent figure lying on the bed in front of Spock. "Jim Kirk loves you." She looked up again. "You were taught to survive - without that you would never have had the courage to stand against your father. I knew you had to leave Vulcan, I understood how you felt even if your father didn't. There's too much of me in you, Spock..." She moved forward until only the narrow bed with its precious burden separated them. "Children grow and change - they must live their own lives. Your life is Starfleet now, and Jim Kirk. Reach out to him, not into yourself. He's a strong man, Spock...strong because of you. He needs you now. Don't let go of yourself - for his sake."

They stood for a long moment in silence. Amada couldn't tell if Spock had even heard her. There was no change in his face, no acknowledgement of her words. Slowly she turned away and quietly walked out of Sickbay. She didn't know if she had done the right thing to come. Somehow Spock had to realize how much Kirk needed him. If he could break out of the fear that held him, maybe he could reach out and give Kirk the support which he badly needed. By giving of himself, he might shake off some of his brooding despair and be able to strengthen his friend.



Warm fingers weaved through the blackness of his existence. He gradually came back from the coldness of his world and floated upward. The void filled with warm colors, the swirling mists grew brighter, and reality slowly dawned.

Tears were sliding down the Vulcan's face, hot tears which splashed onto Kirk's chest as Spock leaned over him, his hands still fixed in the now-familiar melding pattern. Kirk blinked a couple of times before the fuzziness cleared from his vision. His throat felt cracked and dry.

"Spock..."

No more speech would come - but that was sufficient. Spock slowly sat back, struggling to stop the tears which had started when he'd first achieved the meld and found the almost total blackness of Kirk's mind; but the strain of the past week, his exhaustion, and finally his mother's words, had sapped the fragile control that he had fought so desperately to maintain. His sobs grew stronger as he gave in.

Kirk weakly reached out, took hold of Spock's shoulder, and managed to draw Spock's head down onto his chest. He lay silently holding the shaking body.

It was a long time before Spock regained control. The sobbing gradually ceased, but he didn't move. Kirk gently put his hand on the silky, raven hair, understanding Spock's need for silence, and for contact.



He must have dozed off. McCoy was suddenly there, fussing like a mother hen, and Spock was gone. He felt weak, but oddly at peace. He lay quietly, not resisting any of McCoy's ministrations. When he had finished, the doctor stood looking down at him.

"Welcome back."

"Thanks."

A brief smile crossed McCoy's face. He squeezed Kirk's shoulder. "Get some rest. I'll be back later."

The bridge was quiet, the crew working in its usual efficient way. McCoy saw Spock leaning over his computer, his face bathed in the strange bluish hue. He walked over and stood beside him. At first the Vulcan ignored him, but finally he straightened and turned to face McCoy, a slightly wary look in his eyes.

McCoy looked at him for a few seconds. Spock had not stayed in Sickbay. He had simply called to say that the Captain was conscious, and had left before the doctor had arrived. What had he wanted to hide?

As the dark eyes met his, McCoy drew a deep breath. "I only wanted to say 'thank you', Spock."

A slight nod, nothing else.

McCoy felt a little uncomfortable, but plowed ahead. "I shouldn't have blamed you. It wasn't your fault..."

Spock's expression didn't change.

"I guess what's important is that Jim's back..." Suddenly, McCoy had the feeling that he was intruding. He looked down at his feet. "Just wanted to say I'm sorry." He turned abruptly and made his way to the turbolift.

"Doctor..."

Spock's voice made him start. He turned around, the distance of the bridge separating them, but one man holding them close.

"...so am I."

Brown eyes and blue met with understanding.



"Damn it, Bones, will you let me out of this place? There's absolutely nothing wrong with me - even I can read that stupid panel!"

"Ten pounds underweight, physically drained, lungs weak, partially-healed wound in the middle of your back, chest muscles torn - 'absolutely nothing wrong'?"

"For once, I agree with you, Doctor..."

Kirk and McCoy had been so caught up in their argument that they hadn't heard Spock come in.

"This is a conspiracy," Kirk muttered, slumping back into the pillows.

"Plus, Captain, you still won't eat...and if you try to walk to the far side of the room, you're exhausted. Still feel fine?"

Kirk glared at McCoy but didn't answer. The doctor sailed and turned back to Spock. "Did you get the information?"

"Affirmative. We are only two parsecs from Rigel 9. There is a suitable facility in their capital city. I have made all the necessary arrangements."

"What arrangements?" Kirk was ignored.

"Who's in charge of medicine there?"

"Amos Bradley - a past colleague of yours, I believe."

"What's going on?" Again no one answered him.

"Amos! Now that's a stroke of luck."

"Will someone tell me what the hell's going on?"

"Of course, Captain," said McCoy in his most professional manner, although he was unable to keep the gleam out of his eyes. "I have requested medical leave for both you and your first officer. I was going to come along, but forgot about that blasted lecture tour I'd agreed to. We are very close to Rigel 9, and there is an excellent rehabilitation center there - and you two are going. Spock needs rest and time to adjust to the drug that is getting his blood level back to normal. You need more time to recover, and you'll recover faster in fresh air and sunshine, with plenty of good food..."

"I don't need..."

"Medical order, Jim. I'm not going to argue - you're going!"

"The *Enterprise* will go on to Starbase 12, Captain, for repair of the damage sustained in the fight with the Orions. The crew is going to have a few weeks of shore leave. We are going to make advantageous use of that free time."

"At least someone could have included me in the planning," Kirk muttered.

"And ended up in a bigger argument than we're in now? Not on your life, Captain. It's not often I get to order you around, but I'm ordering now - and arguing's not good for a man in your condition."

Kirk's muttering stopped, and he lay staring at McCoy. Then slowly a smile showed at the corners of his mouth.

"I concede defeat, Bones. You're right, as usual."

Spock silently let out his pent-up breath. He had expected Kirk to be more difficult.



It was with genuine regret that McCoy left them. He had beamed down with Kirk and Spock, had seen that Kirk was properly received. After a long talk with Amos Bradley, he reluctantly returned to the ship.

Kirk tried his best to be cooperative, but he was unused to being an invalid, or at least to being treated like one, and was irked by all the restrictions put on his activities. He grew depressed as he was fussed over and waited upon. Spock watched as Kirk drew ever further away, then finally went to talk to Dr. Bradley.

Bradley listened as Spock explained the problem. He had not known many Vulcans other than the ones who had come to his clinic. He had found them all to be cold and undemonstrative, but this man was different. Although he spoke with the cool logic of his race, there was a deep, underlying concern in his manner which impressed Bradley.

"So, Mr. Spock, you feel you are more qualified to care for Captain Kirk than the members of my staff?"

"Not more qualified, sir, but better able to understand and deal with the Captain. His problems are no longer entirely medical, and I feel competent to cope with those areas. Any medical treatment would, of course, come from your people."

Bradley looked at him thoughtfully, then seemed to reach a conclusion. "Leonard said that I should abide by your wishes. He mentioned that something like this might happen. Well, he knows his stuff. All right, Mr. Spock - I'll have my staff brief you..."

Spock hardly heard Bradley's words. It did not surprise him that McCoy had anticipated Kirk's reaction, but he was surprised by the doctor's recommendations. McCoy could resent and fight with him, but his sensitivity almost always won out where Kirk was concerned.



Spock gently shut the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Kirk was slumped down in the pillows, his eyes shut. Spock knew he wasn't sleeping, so he went over and opened the curtains. Bright sunlight flooded the room, its long fingers of gold falling across the bed and resting on the pale figure lying there. Kirk opened his eyes, squinting against the brightness.

"Was that necessary?"

Spock ignored the tone in Kirk's voice. "It's a nice day, Jim. I thought you might enjoy going for a walk."

"You thought? Nice try, Spock, but I'm a prisoner here - sick, you know, mustn't exert myself..." Kirk closed his eyes. His voice had sounded bitter, hating himself, hating the weakness which forced others to have to look after him.

Spock didn't move from the window. "There are no others, Jim - just me. Would you like to go for a walk?"

Kirk's eyes slowly opened. "What do you mean, 'no others'?"

"Precisely that. Except for some necessary medical treatment, there is only you and me. As you grow stronger, you will need less treatment. I think I can treat you sufficiently - provided you cooperate."

A smile crossed Kirk's face for the first time in days. "Spock, you'll find me the most cooperative patient in the universe!"

Spock highly doubted the truth of Kirk's statement, but said nothing. Moving to the closet, he got out some of Kirk's clothes, then moved over to the bed where Kirk was sitting expectantly. He stood back and let the captain dress himself, steeling himself to watch Kirk's slow, painful movements, not allowing himself to reach out to help.

Finally, Kirk stood and held out the tunic. "I think you'll have to do this," he said with a rueful grin.

As Spock put the tunic over Kirk's head, he saw the still-fresh wound on the human's back. It stood out red and ugly on the lightly-bronzed skin. As Kirk moved his arms, a slight grunt escaped him. Spock gently pulled the material down, and Kirk tugged it into place with his familiar movement. He walked slowly across the room and picked up a comb from the table, pulling it through his tangled hair. Then he turned to the Vulcan.

"Ready." He looked so much like an expectant child, that it was difficult for Spock to keep from smiling.

The grounds of the clinic were immense and parklike. Small animals scampered across the grass and through the large trees. Kirk and Spock walked slowly, enjoying the light breeze and warm sun. They came to a stream bubbling down a slight slope and sat by the edge. Kirk took off his boots, letting the cool water flow over his feet. Spock sat with his arms hugging his knees, his eyes on Kirk, worried that perhaps they had come too far. But Kirk seemed all right. He was idly flicking tiny pebbles into the water, his mind seemingly miles away.

"Why didn't you tell me Sarek was your father?"

Spock started. They had sat a long time in silence, and he wasn't ready for Kirk's question. Looking up, he saw Kirk's gaze was fully on him, the hazel eyes somewhat puzzled. Spock sat in silence for a few moments before he answered.

"I assumed that you already knew, Captain."

"There's more than one Vulcan ambassador..."

Spock nodded. "But only one with a human wife..." His voice grew soft. "There's only one Vulcan on all of Vulcan who has a human wife..."

Kirk drew his feet out of the water and absently rubbed them dry. He had been surprised to discover Sarek and Amanda were Spock's parents, but as he thought about it, he wondered if he really should have been. He knew Spock was a hybrid - it was certainly no secret - but he rarely thought about it. If he had made an effort to check his dossier, he would have known that Spock's father was the Vulcan ambassador going to Babel, but things had been so hectic after the *Enterprise* had received her orders, that he hadn't had time to turn around.

"Still, you might have mentioned it."

Spock's dark eyes met Kirk's thoughtfully. It wasn't often that his captain reproached him. He must have been more disturbed than Spock suspected, being caught off guard like that. Spock had been embarrassed often enough to understand how Kirk felt.

"I agree, it was a dereliction on my part. I apologize."

The hazel eyes softened. Kirk knew Spock wouldn't repeat such an error. From now on, whenever they came into contact with a Vulcan, Kirk would probably know his life-history from pre-reform Vulcan to the present. Oh, well - better to be over-prepared than to get hit with another corker like that.

Spock got to his feet. "I think it is time we started back."

Kirk looked reluctant, but didn't argue. He pulled on his boots somewhat awkwardly, his back protesting the slight strain. Spock reached out his hands as Kirk started to get up, and easily lifted the human to his feet.

They walked slowly back to their building in companionable silence. Kirk was more tired than he cared to admit, but also more content than he had been since they arrived. Spock would make no demands on him, provided he didn't overdo it. He felt free and at peace with the world.



The days passed quietly. Spock quickly learned the massage and therapy exercises that Kirk required and went about his tasks with easy efficiency. Dr. Bradley had kept a close check on him at first, feeling his responsibility to McCoy, but after observing Spock and seeing Kirk's favorable response, he worried less and left them more on their own.

A part of Kirk's therapy was swimming in the heated pool. It was what he enjoyed most and what Spock enjoyed least. Kirk had assured Spock that he was quite safe swimming by himself, but Spock hesitated to let him be such a long distance away, so was always at his side as Kirk slowly swam up and down the length of the pool. Kirk's chest ached badly as he forced weak lungs and injured muscles, but the soothing heat of the water made it possible for him to keep going. Spock kept careful count of the laps, making sure that Kirk did no more than what had been mapped out on his recovery program.

Kirk was impatient with the continued restrictions. He was growing stronger and wanted to do more, but met stubborn resistance from Spock whenever he strayed.

"Damn it Spock, I'm not a baby! I know how much I can do!"

Skeptical brown eyes met his. Spock knew that he could never trust Kirk again. Too often in the past, the captain had pushed himself farther than his physical stamina would allow. This last time, being in command when he should never have left his bed in Sickbay, had cemented Spock's conviction. In the past, Spock was apt to let Kirk convince him that nothing was wrong. Now he knew his captain was a master at concealing his real condition. He had control that Spock had not realized it was possible for a human to possess. When Kirk was backed by McCoy, it was doubly difficult to tell if he was indeed suffering. Here, Spock could be sure. Kirk underwent a daily physical exam, and Spock remained at his side while it was being conducted. He knew the extent of Kirk's injuries; he knew that although there had been tremendous improvement, there was still a long way to go. There was no way Kirk was going to stray from the program that Bradley had personally set up.

Kirk's anger slowly died. When he met that patient look of Spock's, he knew that there was no point arguing. Spock would let him blaze, would put up with every angry insult Kirk could hurl at him. He would not argue back - in fact, he would do nothing. But he would be immovable. Muttering quietly to himself, Kirk stretched out on the bed and forced his body to relax. Yelling at Spock wasn't going to get him anywhere. He would do just as well yelling at a brick wall.

Spock heaved a silent sigh and set about his task. He gently kneaded tight muscles, gently but firmly moved Kirk's arms, trying to ignore the involuntary intake of breath as protesting muscles made themselves felt. Spock firmly massaged those muscles, then again stretched Kirk's arms, bringing tears to the human's eyes.

"I would hate to have you as an enemy, Mr. Spock," Kirk gasped through clenched teeth. "It's painful enough having you as a friend."

Spock's eyebrows lifted slightly, but he made no comment - only continued to stretch and massage the injured muscles.



Another scout ship arrived where the large Orion vessel silently waited to hear the outcome of the last assault on the *Enterprise*. Its commander D'Tra again stood in the briefing room.

"We have failed to prevent the *Enterprise* from arriving at Babel - the conference has begun. We have no hope of stopping the conference now, but the Federation will pay. We will attack as the ship carrying the delegates leaves Babel - we will show the Federation that we will not tolerate interference with our goals. For this purpose, we need to know when and how they are leaving. There is only one man who surely knows, and that is the captain of the *Enterprise* - we must find him, and soon. Our reports say he is on Rigel 9 - he was hurt in a fight with D'Trel. We must go there and take him..." D'Tra stood silent for a moment, his eyes glowing. "Once we have our information, he will be left with me...alone..."

D'Trel's death would be avenged. In the lonely life of the Orion raider, a bond would often be formed between a commander and one whom he considered most worthy - someone who could be his companion, his confidant, his equal. Often, upon the death of the commander, this bloodmate would assume the leadership of the vessel and would then choose his own bloodmate. The depth of sharing between bloodmates was such that at the death of one, the other would not rest until the one who had caused the bloodmate's death was himself dead. It was an accepted part of

Orion life - and D'Tra's crew would do all in their power to help him avenge D'Trel's death. Whoever was most successful might then be taken as the next bloodmate.

Only the most experienced left on the next leg of the mission. From now on, whenever an Orion was found, he would be detained and held - Starfleet would give no leeway. They commandeered a small Tellerite vessel, using its terrified commander to assure their landing on Rigel 9, then left him stuffed in a storage compartment aboard the ship and melted into the city.



Kirk leaned back in the chair, taking care not to jar his back. He was tired, almost unpleasantly so. For the first time since they had arrived on Rigel 9, he and Spock had left the hospital complex and toured the large city of Spaah, where the center was located. They had prowled the shopping areas, fascinated by the large variety of goods from all over the galaxy. It was rare that they had the free time to indulge in such a pastime, and they had found it thoroughly enjoyable.

For the first time in several weeks, Spock had lost himself in his surroundings and largely forgotten about Kirk. Because of that, and because the captain was determined not to spoil Spock's outing, Kirk had exhausted himself. When Spock stopped examining some Rigelian artifacts, he noticed that Kirk was very, very pale and moving with considerable difficulty. Furious with himself and with Kirk, he steered his captain to a nearby cafe and insisted that Kirk sit down while he went to get them both something to drink. Kirk didn't argue - he was feeling sick and wobbly. He knew Spock was angry with him, but he hated to admit the lingering weakness, hated to tie Spock down when he could be off enjoying himself instead of having to attend an invalid.

Spock stood in line, waiting to be served. His eyes roved over the people moving about him. There were many representatives of the galaxy, some hurrying by, intent on their business, others moving more slowly as they looked in windows of the various stores.

He got the drinks and started back to where Kirk was sitting. In the distance, he saw Kirk with his hands over his eyes. Again he felt his anger rise that he hadn't noticed Kirk was getting tired. He knew he couldn't trust Kirk to say he was in difficulty - the human would go until he dropped before he complained.

Suddenly, Spock stopped, all senses alert. A strange odor hung in the air, an odor so slight that the average person would never notice it. It was an odd, musky smell. Spock knew that only one race in the galaxy possessed that distinctive odor: Orions. He had been exposed to it only once before, and that had been far across the galaxy from Rigel 9. He had been a lieutenant in charge of a simple survey trip to Ordan, a planet rich in minerals but devoid of animal life. They had almost completed gathering their data when they had received an emergency signal from their ship, which had suddenly come under attack. They had waited helplessly while the battle raged in space above them. The Orion ship had been badly damaged, and some of its crew had escaped by shuttle to the planet. They had not expected to be met there by members of Starfleet. Spock had never forgotten their hostility as they were held captive, he'd never forgotten the air of menace, nor would he ever forget the distinctive, musky odor of the species, an odor which increased as their primitive emotions were freed. The spy aboard the *Enterprise* had had his scent masked, and that was one of the things that had thrown Spock off the track of the Orions for so long.

Without seeming to do so, Spock carefully scanned the crowd. Finally, he spotted them standing at the far corner of the courtyard. They blended into the background; only an experienced eye looking specifically for them would have found them there. Keeping an eye on them, Spock walked over to Kirk. As he put the drinks on the table, Kirk looked up, his face pale and full of pain. Spock reached into his pocket and pulled out a container of red pills. He shook out a couple and handed them to Kirk. They were taken without argument.

As they finished their drinks, Spock kept a wary eye on the two Orions. They neither moved nor spoke. Their strange green eyes never left Kirk. Spock was aware of the single-minded purpose of the Orion race. He had viewed the tremendous surgical alteration Thelev had undergone to pass himself off as an Andorian; he had even had contact lenses which disguised the green cat-like eyes. The Orions rarely came to populated planets, and they never mixed socially. Now that the Federation and Starfleet were looking for them, why were they here? Why now? And what did they intend to do?

Kirk moved painfully in his seat. "I think we'd better get back, Spock. I've just about had enough."

Rather an understatement, Spock thought to himself as he helped Kirk to his feet. As they walked back, Spock automatically slowed his stride to match Kirk's. He was acutely aware that the two Orions were following, always staying the same distance away. Spock doubted that they realized he had seen them. A human wouldn't have, and Spock doubted if he would have, if it weren't for their peculiar scent.

When they got back to the hospital complex, Spock helped Kirk undress and step into the hot whirlpool bath, then set the temperature and speed. As Kirk eased down into the foaming water, he let out a deep sigh. Spock adjusted the headrest, made sure Kirk was comfortable, then left him to soak and relax.

He carefully shut the door behind him as he entered the living room. Kirk needed time to recover from the strain of the day's outing, and he needed time to think. He walked over to the window and looked out at the lights of the hospital buildings and the city beyond. Somewhere out in that vastness were two Orions, possibly more. Spock knew that Orions rarely came to inhabited planets. Any dealings they had with other races were carried on from their home planet. Yet now they were here on Rigel 9, and Spock was sure it was no accident that they happened to be where the commander of the *Enterprise* was. Determination was a part of the Orion makeup. They meant to have Corridon and would eliminate anyone or anything standing in their way.

Making up his mind, he moved over to the small communication panel and placed a call to Starfleet Headquarters on Rigel 9. He explained his suspicions and related what he had observed earlier that day. Like most desk-bound Starfleet representatives, the man he talked to was unwilling to make any decision, but promised instead to contact his superior officer immediately. Spock hid his irritation and said he would be waiting for an answer.

While he waited, he checked on Kirk. The human had fallen into a deep sleep in the whirlpool. Spock shook his head as he turned it off. Kirk didn't stir. The Vulcan pulled up his sleeves and picked Kirk up out of the tub, getting soaked in the process. Carefully, he carried the sleeping human to his bedroom and laid him on the bed, then quickly ran to get a towel. He gently dried Kirk off. Then, cradling the human against his chest, he pulled down the covers and carefully eased Kirk down, pulling the covers over him. During the entire operation, Kirk never stirred - a sure sign of his exhaustion. Spock stood looking down at him, feeling a little exasperated at his captain's continued foolish behavior.

He was shaken out of his reverie by a knock at the outer door of their suite. Abruptly, he became aware that he was soaking wet - but before he had a chance to do anything about it, the knock came again, louder and more insistent. Spock closed the door to Kirk's room as he left it, then activated the lock to the main door.

Starfleet had moved quickly. A man stood in the doorway, the stripes of a commodore on his red uniform. Standing behind him was a small group of security personnel. If he was surprised at Spock's appearance, it did not show on his face.

"Commander Spock?"

"Commodore Moore." They had never met, but each knew the other through reputation. Commodore Moore was a top security man - efficient, well-liked, and capable. "Please come in, sir."

Moore motioned for the detail to stay outside and accepted Spock's offer of a seat and a drink. After taking a long swallow, he looked at the Vulcan. "Now, suppose you tell me exactly what you saw today..."



After Spock finished, Moore remained silent, trying to see from all angles exactly what was facing them. He agreed with Spock's assessment: the Orions had not yet given up their assault on the Babel delegates. But why were they suddenly here on Rigel 9? Finally he looked at Spock.

"I think we'd better get Captain Kirk in here, Commander. We need everyone's thoughts on this."

Spock nodded reluctantly as he got to his feet. Just as he was about to leave, Moore stopped him.

"Commander, may I suggest that you perhaps change into some dry clothes?"

Spock had forgotten he had been drenched and was suddenly aware of his cold, clammy clothes. "Of course, Commodore. I shall return in a moment."

Kirk was still deeply asleep when Spock went in to wake him. The Vulcan stood by the bed, reluctant to put this problem directly on Kirk's shoulders - but there was no way it could be avoided. Kirk had to know what was going on. He reached down finally, touching Kirk's shoulder.

Surprisingly, Kirk woke instantly, a little startled to find himself in bed. He rolled over and sat up.

"Problem?"

Spock knew how easily Kirk could often read him; he wasn't surprised at Kirk's question. "A big one, Jim. Commodore Moore's waiting in the next room."

"Chet Moore?"

Spock nodded and waited silently, as Kirk stiffly climbed out of bed and put on the robe which had been lying on the end of it.

"Let's go."

Moore was concerned as his eyes took in the pale, thin figure that accompanied Spock into the room. Spock had told him that Kirk had been injured, but he had not realized that it had been this serious.

"Chet, it's been a long time."

"Hello, Jim," said Moore, taking the offered hand. "I'm sorry we had to meet on account of this problem."

Kirk stuffed his hands in the pockets of his robe. "Spock said there was trouble. What's going on?"

Briefly, Moore related what Spock had told him. Kirk heard him out without comment, his eyes darkening a

little as he heard about their encounter with the Orions. Spock forced himself to return Kirk's look. Kirk would know why he had remained silent; it didn't need to be voiced.

"So that's all we know, Jim. We need to know why they're here and what they want."

Kirk broke his locked gaze with Spock and settled himself gingerly on the arm of a chair. "I think I know why. They aren't about to give up easily on their claim to Corridon. Their second mass attack proved that..."

"...But it was unsuccessful," Moore broke in. "The delegates got to Babel."

"Yes, they got there - and they are also going to leave. The Orions will have no opportunity to strike while the conference is in session. Their only hope would be to try again once it's over."

"That still doesn't explain why they're here."

"Because I am; because I know when and how the delegates are to be returned home. That's information they desperately need, otherwise they wouldn't have risked coming to a Federation planet after what they did."

"And they'll stop at nothing to get it," added Spock, his eyes on Kirk.

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr. Spock," Kirk said with a rueful grin. "Not a very pleasant prospect."

"We'll increase security at the hospital, Jim."

Kirk shook his head slowly. "We'll have to move carefully on this one, Chet. I think it's important that we know what their plans are, or at least that we find out enough to know how correct our guess is..."

"I don't like what you're suggesting, Jim. You're leaving yourself open for trouble."

Kirk chuckled softly. "I seem to be saying this a lot recently, but at the moment, my life is not the most important factor. Nothing must happen to the Babel delegates. If I have to be the bait to avoid destruction, then that's my duty as Starfleet would see it - correct?"

Moore frowned, but he couldn't argue. Kirk was right. "All right," he said, getting to his feet. "I'll get some men assigned to the hospital staff...maybe they'll be some help."

"Thanks, Chet. We'll keep in touch."

Kirk and Spock remained sitting in silence after Moore left. Finally, Spock stood up and moved to the intercom. Kirk listened as he spoke. As Spock finished and switched off the console, Kirk stood up.

"Moving in with me, Spock?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose I don't have any choice in the matter."

"No."

Kirk stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing across the room at Spock. He knew the odds of his survival were not good - and Spock's probably stood about the same since he wouldn't leave Kirk's side. Suddenly the pressures of his life, the crushing responsibilities, were there again. Now that he knew what was going on, he would have to take charge.

"All right, I won't argue," Kirk smiled at the look of relief on Spock's face. He had obviously been ready for a fight.



Kirk was lying on his stomach by the pool, letting the hot sun soak into his body. He was beginning to feel stronger, finally no longer completely exhausted each time he carried out his exercises. Spock sat in the shade nearby, his eyes constantly moving, not sure exactly what he was looking for. Dotted around the open area were men hard at work - cutting grass, painting fences - each of them a highly-qualified security guard from Starfleet.

With a grunt, Kirk rolled over and sat up, letting his legs dangle in the hot water of the pool. Spock stood up and walked over to him.

"It's about time for dinner, Jim."

Kirk glanced up at him. "You hungry?"

Spock frowned. "Jim, you've got to start eating more. If you don't, Dr. Bradley is going to start intravenous feeding again."

Kirk made a face, but he knew that Spock was right. He wasn't sure if his lack of appetite was left over from his injuries, or if this constant waiting for the unknown was getting to him. He rose to his feet and walked with Spock back to their room. He dressed slowly, not really wanting to go down to the dining room. When he came out to the living room, he was surprised to find food waiting for him and grateful that Spock had spared him the trip to dinner. They ate in silence. Then Kirk pushed his tray back.

"I think I'm going to go to bed. I'm more tired than I thought," Kirk looked at Spock, at the strain and fatigue which the Vulcan was unable to hide. "Spock, I don't need a nursemaid, you know. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but you've got to take a break even if it's only to walk around the grounds..." He smiled as Spock started to object. "Please, if only to humor me?"

Spock wanted to say no, but gave in to the pleading look on Kirk's face. "All right, Jim. If it will make you feel better, I will go for a short walk. I won't be gone long."

"See you in the morning."

Spock walked slowly in the open parkland around the hospital complex. He knew how tense Kirk was from the constant waiting, and he knew he was being affected by the strain of uncertainty as well. Not since they had been in the small restaurant had he seen any sign of the Orions. But they knew where Kirk was, they would be waiting for their chance...when would they take it?

Finally, he felt he had walked long enough to satisfy Kirk and headed back to their room. He let himself in quietly, immediately going to check on Kirk. The bedroom door was locked...and it had been open when he left. He felt fear and anger flood through him. His tremendous strength tore open the locked door, and his anger drove him forward; he ignored the stunning effect of a phaser set for kill that just grazed past him. One Orion went down under the impact of Spock's body, but the other managed to avoid being trapped by the Vulcan's superior strength. He was on his feet in an instant, picking up a heavy metal chair - and he swung it with all his strength, catching Spock on the side of the head. Blinding pain briefly flashed before blackness overcame the Vulcan. His last conscious sight was of Kirk sleeping peacefully, unaware of the fate that was waiting for him. The aching cry in Spock's mind as he fell to the floor was that he had failed his friend.



Kirk woke to find Spock lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of his bed. His room was filling with men, some of whom were disappearing through the open window.

He was out of bed in a flash and, with help, got Spock on the bed. He grabbed his robe and got a towel out of the bathroom, soaking one end of it with cold water. When he returned to Spock, he saw a thin trickle of blood coming from a large, already bruising area on the side of the Vulcan's head. Kirk gently held the wet towel against it. He looked over his shoulder at the men behind him.

"Someone get Bradley here, on the double!"

Kirk had no time to think further, because Spock was stirring under his hand. Kirk ran the cool cloth over Spock's face again, trying to control the hard lump in his throat.

"Hey, mister, wake up. That's an order!"

The gentle, familiar voice penetrated the blackness in Spock's mind. He moved his face away from the gentle pressure, but the voice wouldn't go away. Eventually, he gave up and opened his eyes. For a long minute, he looked in disbelief at the face above him. It wasn't possible that Kirk was still alive.

But he was.

"Welcome back." A smile touched Kirk's face, but his eyes were full of worry. He caught Spock's hand, preventing him from moving it to his injured head. "Hold it a minute - Bradley's on his way."

Spock took a deep breath, and a shudder passed through his body. Kirk was scared. He didn't know the extent of Spock's injuries, didn't know that Spock's reaction was to the realization that he, Kirk, was still alive. Before either of them had a chance to say anything further, Bradley arrived, closely followed by Commodore Moore. Kirk slowly rose to his feet, making room for Bradley to do his work.

Spock lay silent while Bradley looked him over. After a couple of minutes, the doctor shoved a hypo against Spock's arm and sealed the small wound on the side of the Vulcan's head.

"Nothing serious, Commander. You're not going to feel very well for a couple of days, but it's nothing that won't mend." He packed up his kit and disappeared out the door.

Moore watched the Orion being carried out. "Well, I guess that answers part of our questions."

Kirk nodded. "It's definitely ~~as~~ they're after."

Spock rose a little unsteadily to his feet, trying to ignore the waves of nausea that swept through his body. "They would have been successful, Captain, had it not been for the quick work of the security detail."

Kirk glanced at him, a glint of humor showing in his eyes. "Couldn't have had anything to do with a certain Vulcan ripping open a locked door with his bare hands..."

"I assure you, Captain, I had not intended to damage the door."

Kirk chuckled at Spock's aggrieved expression, then turned to Moore. "All right, Chet - any ideas on what we do now?"

"I'm fresh out of them, I'm afraid. You have any?"

"I'm afraid so, and I don't like it very much. I think I'd better offer myself as an open target..."

"Captain..."

"No, Spock, I've thought it over carefully. How else are we going to be sure of what they're after? They know now that we're going to be waiting for them if they try anything at the hospital. We've got to make it possible for

them to get to me."

"Captain, let me point out that if they take you alone, we have no chance of getting any information back. I mean no offense, sir - but in your weakened condition, you may not survive if they use force..."

"You don't think you're going instead?"

"Jim, there's a possibility they might agree to exchange me for you. That way we'd know where they were and could get you out..."

"I agree with Mr. Spock," Moore broke in, "it's foolish to do this alone, Jim."

Kirk's eyes held Spock's. "You could get killed."

Spock nodded. "I know."

Neither needed to say anything else - the decision had already been made. Kirk turned to Moore.

"Chet, give us a couple of days for Spock to get over this attack, then we'll hash over some sort of plan. All right?"

Moore nodded, unable to speak. He was looking at two men who were probably already dead. He knew it, and they knew it.

As soon as Moore left, Kirk steered Spock into the bedroom. "Come on, mister, you're going to bed. You've just been knocked cold, and I know well enough how you feel."

So that night, it was Kirk who put Spock to bed. He went without protest and was soon asleep.



Three days later, the plan was set. Spock left on an errand to Moore's house, leaving himself open if the Orions decided to take him. A security detail shadowed him - so if the Orions did take him, Starfleet would know where he was being held.

Kirk picked at his breakfast, finally giving up the attempt to eat and pushing his plate away. He paced the room, knowing he wouldn't rest until he had heard from either Spock or Moore. He tried reading, but gave it up as a lost cause.

He had fallen into a light doze when the buzzer sounded. He grunted as he jarred awake, the muscles of his chest pulling when he shifted his weight. He reached over to the automatic lock and was getting to his feet when the door opened. Chet Moore was standing there and, from the grim look on his face, Kirk knew there was trouble.

Moore walked into the room, and Kirk noticed that there were more security guards on duty than there had been the day before.

"They made their move..." It wasn't a question. Moore's presence stated it as a fact.

"Where did they take him?"

"Uh, Jim, I..."

"Chet, where is he?"

"We don't know."

"You don't know?! Commodore, you had an entire security detail surrounding him, and you don't know where he is?!"

"My men are all dead, Jim, along with seven Orions. They didn't give up without a fight, but the Orions must have been expecting something like this and were just better prepared than we were..." He fell silent as Kirk turned away from him. The brief glimpse of Kirk's stricken face stopped Moore from saying anything about the green blood they had found mingled with that of two of the Orion dead. They might have Spock, but he obviously had not been taken without a struggle. Evidently, he had seen that his and Kirk's plan was not going to work, and had realized that if the Orions took him, no one would know where he was being held. He had done his best to abort the mission - unsuccessfully, as it turned out.

"Jim, we received this message about fifteen minutes ago." There was no response from the silent figure looking out the window, but just as Moore was about to repeat himself, Kirk turned around. His face was a mask - only the eyes showed the pain that filled him. He took the message with no comment and read what had almost stopped Moore from bringing it.

"We have the Vulcan, but our interest is not in him. Have Kirk come alone, and we will let the other go. If he does not come, the Vulcan will die. Kirk is already dead. It is senseless to have others continue to die because of him."

Moore watched Kirk as he read. An undefinable look came over Kirk's face as he lifted his eyes from the paper.

"I'll go."

"Jim, are you sure there's no other way?"

Kirk smiled a little. "No, Chet, there isn't. Besides, Spock is my friend. I'll not have him die because of me."

"You're hurt..."

"You're not my doctor...and don't you dare tell Bradley about this!" His eyes softened in appreciation of Moore's obvious concern. "Chet, this is bigger than all of us. They don't want just me. By going, maybe I'll be able to find out exactly what it is they do want. There's a chance they're telling the truth and will let Spock go. I've found out from experience that he has a genius for finding out information under the oddest of circumstances. If either of us finds out what the Orions are going to do, it's worth the trade for my life." The tiny smile returned. "Besides, there's always a chance I'll get out of this alive. You've got to let me take that chance."

Moore found he had to look away from the naked pleading in Kirk's eyes. He knew Kirk had given all the right reasons, but he still couldn't face a man he was going to send to almost certain death. Looking down at his hands, he answered in a low voice. "All right, Jim. I won't stop you."

"You'll let me go alone? I don't want anyone following me."

Moore nodded, still not looking up. "You're on your own."

He didn't look up until the door had closed. He felt in his heart that he should have prevented Kirk from going, or at least have had a security unit tail him, but he knew Kirk was right. It was the only possible way that they might find the Orions, and they needed to know what the Orions had planned. Kirk might be able to buy time, might be able to get Spock free with the information - he was their only link to success or failure.

Kirk knew they wouldn't kill him in the open. He only hoped they would let him live long enough to be taken to where they were holding Spock. Then maybe there would be a chance to end their problems with the Orions, and his life could be traded for something worthwhile. He walked along, trying to make his presence as obvious as possible and wondering when it would happen.

They surrounded him quietly, the four matching their strides to his. He didn't alter his pace, but found himself being steered toward a parked aircar. When they reached it, he was unceremoniously bundled in - then everything went black.



Gradually, he became aware of a warmth surrounding him. He pressed closer and felt an answering pressure. He opened his eyes to discover himself in Spock's arms. Worry crossed his face as he took in the cuts and bruises that covered the Vulcan.

"Superficial only, Jim - I am not in difficulty."



Kirk smiled gently at the reassurance, then moved out of Spock's embrace and rose rather unsteadily to his feet, noticing as he did so that they were in a small, windowless room.

Even though Kirk seemed weak, Spock watched him in relief. When Kirk had been dumped into the room a few hours earlier, Spock had thought him dead; the human's form had lain unmoving after it hit the floor. Spock had checked him over carefully and found Kirk instead to be deeply unconscious, probably rendered so by the same drug that had overcome the Vulcan in his earlier fight with their captors. So he had gathered the human in his arms and waited.

Kirk slowly moved around the room after unsuccessfully trying the door. He was now where he had wanted to be. All he had to do was figure out how to get free. He finally stopped his thorough search and sat down beside Spock.

"Have you found out anything we didn't already know?"

Spock nodded. "I overheard one of the guards saying that the ambassadors to the Babel conference were to be eliminated as they left for their home planets."

Kirk nodded back. "As I suspected. Spock..." his serious eyes met the Vulcan's, "one of us has to get out of here. This information has to get back to Starfleet. If you have the opportunity, escape. Consider that a direct order. I don't want any fool heroics - too many lives are at stake."

Spock forced his face to immobility. He would not refuse to obey a direct order and Kirk knew it, but if there was any way to sneak around the edge of that order, he would. By remaining silent, he would not technically be disobeying, because he had acknowledged nothing.

Kirk smiled slightly at his friend. He knew what Spock was doing, even though he suspected that Spock did not realize he did. Not many men had a friend like that. He only hoped that their friendship would not come to an abrupt end. Then he forced himself to think about the problem at hand.

"We don't have much time. If all goes according to schedule, the conference ends tomorrow, and the ambassadors leave the following day."

Their gazes held, each fully aware that the Orions must not be allowed to carry out their plan. Somehow, one of them must get a message to Starfleet.



They didn't know it but Starfleet was already at work. Moore had done nothing to stop Kirk, but now the entire

fleet in the areas of Rigel 9 and Babel was on alert status. Large groups of security personnel were combing Spaah, the capital city of Rigel 9, where the hospital complex was located. They would find their quarry if it was the last thing they did. The *Enterprise* was on her way from Starbase 12, fully manned. When her crew was informed of what had happened to their captain and first officer, there was not a crewmember aboard who refused to give up leave.



The hours crawled past, and the waiting was becoming unbearable.

"What do you suppose is keeping them?" Kirk asked. "I would have thought from all the fuss that they would have killed me the instant they laid eyes on me."

Spock glanced over to where Kirk was sitting propped up against the wall. "From what I could gather, the man who died on the *Enterprise* was the bloodmate of the Orion in charge of this particular group. I would suppose he wants to be present at your execution."

"Thanks a lot," said Kirk sarcastically. "What the devil are 'bloodmates'?"

"The concept can most simply be explained as a close friendship - a friendship that is to be avenged upon the death of one of its members."

"I suddenly don't believe in friendships."

Spock's eyebrow rose fractionally, causing a small smile to touch Kirk's eyes while he shook his head at the improbability of their situation.

Finally the Orions came - the same four who had met him in the street. At least, he thought they were the same four. He had never seen an Orion in the flesh before, and as far as he could tell, they all looked exactly alike. Spock had no trouble seeing that one of them was different.

Kirk slowly stood as one of the humanoids stepped forward. The cat eyes were mere slits as he stared at Kirk, and the human could feel the animal-like menace of the Orion. The Orion noticed the absence of fear in his captive and was impressed. This human had a control rare to the species. He would forever regret D'Trel's death, but to die with an opponent such as this was at least an honor.

"You are Kirk?" The slight hiss of his voice surprised Kirk. He inclined his head, but didn't speak.

"You came alone. This we did not expect."

Kirk's head rose. "You said Spock would be freed if I did as you asked. So I came alone."

"And he will be freed." Without looking at the others, he gave his orders. "Take the Vulcan."

Kirk held his breath. If they let Spock go, or at least took him out, then he might manage an escape, and the information would get to Starfleet. As the Orions stepped forward to take him, Kirk saw Spock's muscles tense. Their eyes met, and Kirk shook his head fractionally. For a moment Spock ignored him, but Kirk's blazing eyes forced him to obey. Spock's last sight was of his captain standing straight and tall in front of his captor.

They had not intended to let Spock live. Their orders were clear and precise - all *Enterprise* personnel were to die. But they had not counted on the desperate fury of the man under their guard. The ensuing struggle was a reckless battle of one man against three - hopeless odds against highly efficient killers.

A security detail found them lying in an alley. They quickly had a medical team at Spock's side, for he had survived. His captors were dead. Spock was moved to the base hospital, where his wounds could be treated and the full extent of his injuries assessed. After giving him a quick, thorough examination, the medics pumped him full of printox - a concentrated oxyo-stimulant - and he gradually regained consciousness.

When Spock finally got his fuzzy brain to work, he discovered that it was McCoy hovering over him. He shrank from the stricken look on the human's face.

"The Orions have him."

McCoy nodded at what Spock had not said. He knew there was no way Spock would have left Kirk's side unless he had been ordered to do so.

"We'll find him."

"It will be too late, Doctor. They intend to kill him..."

At that moment, Commodore Moore walked in. Spock quickly related the information he had acquired, providing Starfleet with the go-ahead. Its gigantic fleet, already on the alert, now had a specific job to do.

Spock, against all medical advice but McCoy's, joined in the hunt for Kirk. McCoy knew there was no use trying to restrain him. Spock would go until he dropped, so long as Kirk was missing. Commodore Moore - now that his responsibilities to the general fleet were discharged - headed the widescale search. Under his experienced supervision, the security men doubled their efforts.



He was alone in the room except for the one Orion. He sat slumped against the wall, his entire body on fire.

His captor stood near the door, his voice almost purring as he talked to the suffering human.

"The stunner is a most effective weapon, Captain. Each time it hits its mark, it leaves damage. Used often enough on the same subject, it will eventually kill. Do you feel its pain, Captain? Do you feel your body screaming? D'Trel felt that pain, that terror of death, before he died. You will also feel it, but you will not die as easily..."

The stunner sparked and Kirk, who was struggling to his feet, was doubled over. He was hit again before he had a chance to recover, and fell to his knees. Desperately he crawled away, but there was no place to hide. The Orion used the stunner at his own pleasure, drawing out his own satisfaction, leaving Kirk to wait for the next shock, never knowing when it would come, never knowing where it would hit. There was no way he could protect himself. He finally faced the fact that he was going to die. He would run no further. He forced his head up and looked at his captor. He was ready.

The guard at the entrance died before he knew they were there. Quietly making their way down the corridor, they saw two more Orions with their eyes glued to a crack in the door. Security didn't hesitate - their phasers were set on kill. Even in his concern for Kirk, Spock was surprised. Death was not the normal way of Starfleet, though disintegration was more silent than falling bodies. Glancing at Moore's face, he saw grim determination - the Orions had died on his order.

Spock crept forward and peeked in the crack as the humanoids had been doing only a moment before. All he could see was an Orion; there was no sign of Kirk. He angled his body trying to see more. Then he heard Kirk's voice. It was low, and Spock detected a slight trembling - Kirk must be in real pain to have lost control. It was so slight a loss that someone who did not know him well would never notice. To Spock, it was a scream of agony.

"I won't fight you. I won't give you the satisfaction of hearing me beg for my life. You might as well kill me now, get it over with..."

If the Orion answered Kirk, Spock never heard. Any reply was lost in the crash of the door breaking under the violent force of the raging Vulcan. The tawny body went limp from Tal-Shaya before any of the others had time to move a muscle.

The room was instantly full of people. Hesitating momentarily in the doorway, McCoy saw that for Kirk and Spock the room was empty - for each, only the living presence of the other mattered - but for once, it didn't bother him. Jim was alive, and that was the only thing of importance.

The Babel conference was over. Corridon had been admitted to the Federation by the tiniest of margins, many delegates having been swayed, as the Tellerites had feared, by the looming presence of Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan. Now the ambassadors were heading home aboard the *Lexington*, escorted by the *Excalibur* and the *Enterprise*. The Orions had been stopped. Strung out as their fleet was, they were easily defeated by the superior forces of Starfleet. Now their space was being patrolled by vessels which were under orders to stop Orion ships first, and ask questions later. The Federation Council was meeting with the Organians to deal with the question of Orion's disruption of their united planets.

Kirk was sitting on his bed, McCoy standing at his side, running a scanner over him. He had only had time to tell a bewildered Amos Bradley that he was there, and that he was taking Kirk and Spock with him, before he had to be back aboard the *Enterprise*. Now he finally had time to fully assess the injuries that Kirk had suffered. Spock was in Sickbay under M'Benga's ruling hand.

McCoy was somewhat surprised as he read the results of Kirk's scan: the Captain was in better condition than when he had beamed down to Rigel 9. Bradley had obviously kept his thumb on Kirk's treatments, and Spock had managed to get him to follow instructions. Apart from being bruised and thin, he wasn't in bad shape.

McCoy pressed a hypo against Kirk's arm, and let the scanner run until the pain level started to drop to a more normal position. Finally, he was satisfied. "That was some weapon the Orions had..."

"You don't need to tell me, Bones. I'm quite aware of it." Kirk stood up slowly, and picked up the gold shirt he had tossed on the floor.

McCoy looked at the scar on Kirk's back. "Another couple of weeks, and I'll be able to repair that," he said, trying not to notice the slowness of Kirk's movements. "I'd suggest you get some sleep, Jim. Spock's going to be all right, and Scotty's perfectly capable of handling escort duty..."

Kirk glanced at McCoy's hopeful face and nodded. He was sore and bruised, although whatever McCoy had given him had dulled most of the pain. He sat down again and slowly undressed, finally accepting McCoy's help without protest. He carefully lay back, letting McCoy pull up the covers, and was asleep in seconds.

McCoy left his hand resting on Kirk's shoulder for a moment as he fought an overwhelming protective urge toward

his friend. When they'd first beamed up, he had quickly checked Kirk over, confirming that he was fit enough to be allowed to go to his own quarters. But to the doctor's irritation, Kirk, obviously exhausted, had insisted on staying in Sickbay until the extent of Spock's injuries had been evaluated and treatment started. If the Vulcan's condition had been at all serious, McCoy knew that Kirk would still be there.

Then, with a small smile, he took his hand away. He shouldn't let it nag at him. He knew he had a piece of Kirk's heart where Spock could not intrude. Feeling more at peace with himself, he left Kirk to his healing sleep.



The three ships had a much more peaceful trip than the *Enterprise* had encountered on the way to Babel. Kirk gradually regained his strength, and McCoy allowed him to start working half-shifts, but kept a close eye on him to make sure he didn't overdo it. Spock remained in Sickbay under M'Benga's supervision. Kirk was a frequent visitor, and McCoy didn't discourage it, since he knew he could check on the captain's condition daily, without having to haul him kicking and screaming to Sickbay.

The night before they were due to arrive at Vulcan, Ananda asked the three of them to dinner aboard the *Lexington*. McCoy hesitated, not sure if Spock was up to it. Kirk suggested that perhaps Spock's parents could come aboard the *Enterprise* - that way, Spock would not be exposed to the strain of transporting. They finally decided to let Spock make the decision; he was the one who best knew how he felt.

At first, Spock was tempted to decline. He had not faced his father since the night Kirk had almost died. He didn't know if he could bear the familiar condemnation. However, Kirk and McCoy seemed eager to have them come, so he kept his peace.



The meal was eaten in silence, according to Vulcan custom. There had been some tension when Sarek and Ananda first arrived, but it had soon disappeared. During the meal, Spock was aware of Sarek scrutinizing him; but he could see that his father's gaze contained curiosity and a hint of puzzlement, instead of the usual disapproval. He glanced occasionally at his mother, but all she did was smile serenely.

By the time the meal was finished, Spock felt exhausted. He thought he was covering it well, but Kirk had noticed his hands trembling slightly and the unusual slump to his shoulders. He quietly took McCoy aside and suggested that Spock should return to Sickbay. Ananda requested that she be allowed to go with them, to spend some time alone with her son. Spock rose a little unsteadily, then turned to his father, who had risen with him.

"Goodnight, father. I apologize for having to leave before you are ready to go..."

Sarek shook his head. "There is no need for apologies, Spock. You have more than reason enough for doing so. I will come later to get your mother. Perhaps you will feel more rested, and we can talk."

Spock's eyebrows rose slightly at his father's tone, at the hint of pride and affection he sensed. "I shall look forward to your arrival."

Clucking like a mother hen, McCoy followed Spock and Ananda, leaving Kirk nursing his coffee, while Sarek poured himself a glass of pale blue peach juice. Kirk sensed that Sarek was uneasy about something, but bided his time. He had learned from dealing with Spock that if a Vulcan wanted to discuss something, he would usually get around to it without any prodding.

Finally, Sarek broke the silence. "My wife tells me you risked your life in the attempt to save mine, Captain..."

Kirk flushed. He took a swallow of his coffee as he tried to think of something to say, but Sarek went on before he had a chance to answer.

"I've had several long talks with Commodore Wesley in the past few days. He told me what happened with the Orions, what happened to you and my son..." He fiddled with his drink for a few moments, then continued, not looking at Kirk. "Captain, you understand Spock...I don't. You possibly know him better than anyone, including his mother..."

As Sarek hesitated again, Kirk waited in silence, wondering where the conversation was heading.

"There are many things I don't know about Spock, and many things that I would like to know..." He swallowed, and his dark eyes met Kirk's.

Kirk smiled. The breach between father and son was about to close. Two proud and stubborn men had faced each other - now, finally, one had started to accept the other for what he was, no longer allowing pride to destroy them further.

"Ambassador, I would be proud to introduce you to your son."





When Someone Understands



The planet was but a memory now - it had completely disappeared off the view screen and was almost out of sensor range. The hubbub on the bridge had died down and all personnel had returned to their stations, their assignments taking all their attention.

All but one. Leonard McCoy stood just to the side of the turbolift doors, a slight frown on his face. He alone had noticed the Captain as he returned to his command chair and had seen the unnatural slump of his shoulders, the unusual tightness of his face.

"Deneva is behind us now," McCoy thought to himself, "but how long will it be before Jim lets it go? A lot has happened to him in the past twenty-four hours. It's going to hit him, and the longer he holds it at arm's length, the worse it's going to be."

Covering the short distance to where Kirk sat, McCoy put his hand on the Captain's shoulder.

"You all right?"

He felt the muscles stiffen under his hand and noted with growing concern that Kirk refused to meet his eyes, nor did he speak. Just a slight nod - nothing more. Then he was out of the command chair checking a course correction with the navigator.

McCoy knew he had been rebuffed. He almost tried again but knew the bridge was not the place for a confrontation and if he pushed Kirk now, that was exactly what he was going to get. Glancing at the chronometer, he saw it was time for Peter Kirk's medication.

"I'll be in Sickbay," he said to no one in particular and left the bridge.

The exchange between Kirk and McCoy had not gone entirely unnoticed. Spock had turned to speak with the Captain just as McCoy had moved to his side and had witnessed Kirk's uncharacteristic reaction. He saw Kirk's face darken as McCoy spoke to him, the look of pain as he stood and moved away from the comforting hand.

Spock watched McCoy as he entered the turbolift. A heaviness touched the human's movements as though he were carrying a great weight. Spock saw that the normally cynical exterior that covered McCoy's sensitivity was momentarily gone, exposing the real man beneath. McCoy had been through a lot himself the past few days - deaths, blaming himself for what he thought was Spock's permanent blindness - and yet he still left his own troubles behind and worried about others.

A hand appeared on the console beside him, the gold braid of command catching a glint of light coming from the instruments. Slowly Spock looked up into deeply haunted eyes. The obvious joy that had sparkled there a short time before was now totally absent. Spock knew that the deaths of Kirk's brother and sister-in-law had to be a raw, open wound, yet something else was wrong. He had seen Kirk torn apart before, he had been with him when Edith Keeler had died, and had sat with him after they returned to the ship. Jim's grief had almost been too much for him to stand. No matter how much he tried to convince Kirk that he had made the only decision possible, it didn't help. It was also the first time that Spock had come to terms with his own feelings for another person. He had sat for long hours with his Captain - the other's grief enveloping them both - long hours of silence when the only reality was the presence of the other.

He had gone over his association with Kirk then. He could not pinpoint the time when he had reached out to clasp the hand of friendship that had been offered him. He remembered Kirk's defense of him when, with the pressure of galactic war threatening, Kirk had protected him from the bigotry of Lt. Stiles. That had surprised him. He had not really thought of Kirk before then as anything other than a commanding officer - one who deserved respect and loyalty because of proven ability.

Then he began to see Kirk in a different light. There was the confused hesitant man twinned by the transporter, yet who had fought desperately to retain his identity - a struggle he knew so well. The compassionate man who

understood the loneliness of a young boy like Charlie who was doomed to spend his life with formless creatures incapable of touching and love. The sometimes reckless hothead who would risk his own life, taking on a spoiled alien brat like Trelane, and rock creatures like the Horta, rather than to jeopardize the lives of his crew. And the strong man who made mistakes and was not afraid to admit to them - who would concede that the Federation may be wrong and the Gorns had a right to defend the unknown territory they had claimed as their own.

But most of all, Spock finally realized that he had met a person as alone as he was himself - a man who needed the support of a friend just as much as he did.

"You have the con, Mr. Spock."

The voice was flat. Something was gnawing at Kirk, something that went very deep.

Spock stood. "Captain..."

Kirk shook his head. "No, Spock. Please, just take care of things." He turned and quickly left the bridge.

The watch finally came to an end. Spock turned command over to his replacement and left for dinner. It proved to be a solitary meal - neither McCoy nor the Captain appeared. Concerned, Spock went to the Sickbay. McCoy was in his office, a half eaten tray of food on the desk beside him. He looked up at Spock's arrival.

"Forgive me, Doctor. I trust I am not disturbing something important."

"No, Spock, just a backlog of reports that needed to be finished a week ago. Come on in."

He watched keenly as Spock entered the room and sat down. It was not often that the Vulcan sought him out and when he did it was usually for the same reason each time. McCoy made a mental bet with himself.

Spock was looking at his hands folded in his lap and seemed content just to sit there. Curiosity got the best of McCoy.

"What's the matter, Spock? Are your eyes giving you trouble?"

The Vulcan glanced over at him, mild surprise showing in their depths. "Not at all, Doctor. I told you the blindness was totally self-induced. There will be no recurrence." He hesitated. Although he had known the doctor for some time, he still found it very difficult to talk with him about anything but trivial matters.

Squaring his shoulders, he plunged ahead. "Doctor, I observed on the bridge that you saw something unusual in the Captain's behaviour..."

"Bull's eye!" thought McCoy. "I was right. It is Jim that brought you here."

"...yet you hesitated talking with him..." Spock broke off, obviously not too sure how to proceed. McCoy smiled slightly and continued for him.

"He's torn up inside, Spock. His brother's death has hit him hard, although he showed very little emotion on Deneva. Then you were hurt which pushed the thought of his brother right to the back of his mind; in a natural course, the grief should have been expended. Your blindness was probably the last straw..." He saw the Vulcan's eyebrows lift but continued without comment. "Now he's starting to face his loss with no interruptions and the starkness of the situation is hitting home. It will be a few days, but he'll be all right. Be patient with him."

Spock's frank gaze never left McCoy's face while the doctor was talking and, as he finished speaking, the brown eyes darkened. He agreed in part with what McCoy had said. Kirk had indeed been through an emotional wringer, but it was not grief which had shone out of his eyes as he had turned command over to his First Officer. Now he knew McCoy had not seen it - had assumed as would the rest of the crew that Kirk was mourning his family. Thanking the doctor gravely, the Vulcan got up and left.

The ship was slowing down for the night. The third watch was coming on duty. It had been a hard day and most of the crew were heading for a well-deserved rest.

Spock headed for his quarters, noting that, as usual, crewmen passed him silently as he went down the corridors. When he was with Kirk, there was greeting and small talk, exchanges of the past day that Kirk seemed to welcome and relish. That never happened when he was alone. The Vulcan wore a "hands off" air that he knew separated him from the humans aboard the ship, but he would not change and was not surprised by the respectful silence.

He passed the door to Kirk's quarters and hesitated. Would it be an intrusion if he knocked? He was not familiar enough with situations like this to know what was considered proper. But the haunted look in Kirk's eyes came into his mind and he couldn't let that go past. He rang the buzzer. No answer. He almost turned away, but seeing the door was unlocked, decided to go in.

The room was empty, the bed smooth and unrumpled. The Captain had obviously not come here after he left the bridge. Spock quietly left and went to his own quarters. The red light glowed from the Guardian. Spock stood facing it, lost in thought.



The ship settled into silence. Kirk was aware of the change as he sat amid the flowers in the arboretum. He

had been there for several hours - no one had intruded. He often came there when he was troubled - the familiar sounds and smells reminded him of his home and the comfort he had found there as a young boy.

Home - his father calling to his mother as he arrived back from the day's work. Strong arms swinging him high into the air as he dashed out onto the front porch. He had been very close to his father and the love had been returned. It was that man who had taught him that love was something precious to be treasured and given freely.

But that feeling had always been shattered by Sam. George Samuel Kirk - tall, fair - a brilliant mind enclosed in a handsome body. Kirk had always stood in awe of his older brother. There was nothing that Sam couldn't do, nothing he attempted had ever been anything but highly successful. But Sam was a loner, close to no one. Sam and his father were distantly polite to each other, but there was no love returned by the son to the father. The elder Kirk was perplexed by the rebuff of his affection, and eventually turned that frustrated affection to the tow-headed youth who arrived ten years later. It only served to estrange father and first son further.

There was resentment on Sam's part; brilliant though he was, he was afraid of the potential shown by his younger brother. Things came naturally for Jim Kirk, and where his brother had been brilliant, ten years later another Kirk shattered the memories. A quiet hostility grew from older brother to younger. During their youth it had led to physical battles which Jim had always lost due to his smaller size. Maturity brought strained words and hostile silence.

Almost always the hostility was triggered by Sam's callous treatment of his parents, especially his father. As the elder Kirk grew more feeble in his old age, Sam's treatment of him grew more harsh. When Jim heard that his father was dying, he managed to get leave from his ship and arrived home several days before his father died. Sam, working at the nearby university, did not bother to come to see his father, even though the older man had requested his presence.

Jim Kirk had a temper - Sam Kirk possessed a brewing violence. It had erupted the day of the funeral. It had been a private affair, just family and close friends. When they returned home, the long-spoiling battle erupted in full force. Kirk still cringed at the vicious, bitter accusations that Sam had hurled at him, the years of resentment that had built up against a more loved younger brother. Any feeling of love or respect that he had retained for Sam had evaporated under that onslaught. He heard his brother out without comment, not trusting himself to speak, and when Sam had finished Kirk turned away, said goodbye to his mother, kissed Aurelan, and left.

That was eight years ago. He had seen Sam only once since then: Sam had attended the ceremonies when Kirk had been promoted to Captain, Starship Command Rank. He had come with their mother and his own family.

Sam tried to be friendly, made some small overtures toward healing the terrible hurt that he had inflicted. But it did no good. Jim knew that he wanted to see Sam suffer, so he had closed himself off and virtually ignored his brother. He remembered his mother gently chiding him for his actions, but at the time it made no difference. Sam had hurt him and he wanted to hurt back. He left with the *Enterprise* and did not see Sam again.

A shadow fell across the bench where Kirk was sitting. Looking up, he was not really surprised to see Spock standing there, hands clasped behind his back. He gave a small smile.

"Spock..." The word was more an acknowledgement than a question.

The brown eyes never wavered. "I was becoming concerned, Captain. It is late and you had not returned to your quarters. I knew you often came here and I thought...I could possibly be of assistance."

Kirk's eyebrows rose slightly. Did he ever do anything that was missed by the Vulcan? Probably not, he decided, and felt momentarily uncomfortable at the thought. Then, slightly ashamed of the feeling, he slid over on the bench.

"Sit down, Spock. I appreciate you coming." He kicked himself - it sounded so formal. He still found it difficult sometimes to realize how human the Vulcan could be - how sensitive to his thoughts and problems. He tried again.

"I'm sorry to have run out on you like that, on the bridge. McCoy was going to start something and I just couldn't explain it to him."

Spock said nothing for a few moments, just sat looking at his hands. Then taking a gamble and without looking at Kirk said, "You didn't like your brother, did you, Jim?"

Kirk stared at him, a slightly startled look on his face, trying to figure out how Spock had guessed. He had never talked about his brother with anyone - never mentioned the friction which had kept them apart.

"Spock, how..."

The Vulcan turned to him, compassion shining out of his eyes. "When you left the bridge today you were bitterly denouncing yourself. That is not an emotion caused by grief..."

Kirk interrupted him, unable to hold back the awful guilt any longer.

"I thought I hated Sam. We hadn't spoken in three years - he'd tried and I flatly rejected him. Then, when I

saw him again on Deneva, he was dead." His troubled eyes looked at the Vulcan. "Those three years were a waste, Spock. I should have healed the breach. It would have been so easy."

Spock looked away and answered in a slightly strained voice. "I have been in a similar situation - badly hurting one who held herself open to me. I rejected everything she offered, everything she wanted to give. I have experienced the regret you are suffering. I understand because I, too, cannot repair the damage that had been done. My mother..." He broke off, unable to put into words something that he had tried so often to forget.

Kirk stared at him in astonishment, his mood completely changed. A Vulcan who did not express emotions - how could he hurt another so badly and so purposefully? But he knew better than to ask.

Spock sat quietly, struggling inwardly to control himself. He had just told Kirk something he had hardly even admitted to himself. He had let a very private part of him escape. The image of his mother's face as her small son pushed her away was seared into his memory. His rejection of her love, his inability to ever explain why, and her inability to fully understand that rejection was a scar he would carry with him for his lifetime.

Finally Spock looked up. Hazel eyes, still puzzled but mixed with empathy now, were still locked on his face.

"Jim," he went on, "what happened between you and your brother is finished now. No amount of blame, right or wrong, is going to change the situation. You have your nephew - perhaps you can have with him the understanding that was missing with your brother. Recriminations serve no purpose."

Kirk looked at the brilliant splashes of color of the flowers around them, then his eyes rested again on his friend. Spock had come to him, openly, let his defenses down in an effort to help. Kirk understood the great effort and sacrifice it had taken. Suddenly he felt less guilty, knowing that someone else knew and understood.

He got to his feet. "Come on, Spock. It's been a very long day. I think we could both use some sleep."

Their footsteps echoed as they walked through the corridor, each savouring the presence of the other. No words were spoken - none were necessary.

They stopped as they reached Spock's door. Kirk put a hand on the Vulcan's shoulder as their eyes met.

"Thank you, my friend."

Spock nodded solemnly. They went their separate ways - Kirk to a peaceful, dreamless sleep - Spock to a troubled meditation.



The crew was relieved to see Kirk almost back to his usual self the next morning. He looked tired, but the haunted expression of the day before was gone. McCoy, standing near Spock on the bridge, watched the Captain with satisfaction.

"You see, Spock? All it takes is a little time. Emotion is good for the soul. You should try it sometime; maybe you might even admit there's a heart somewhere inside that confused mess you call a body."

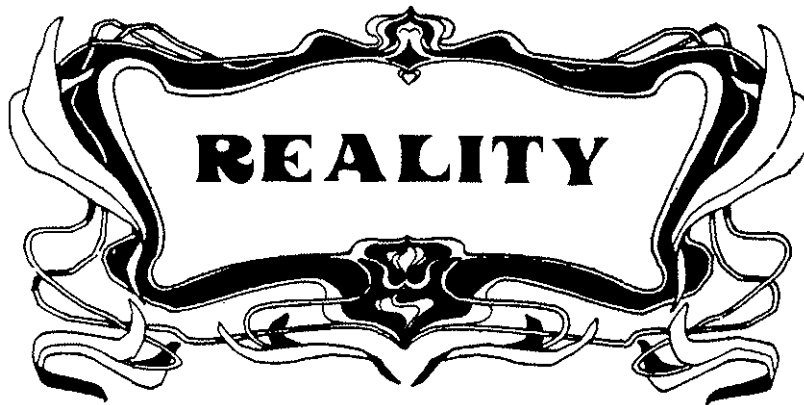
Spock turned an expressionless face to the Doctor, but his eyes momentarily betrayed him. McCoy was startled to see anguish that was quickly blocked out. Only a cool voice replied,

"Emotions are alien to me, Doctor."

McCoy did not press the issue. As he turned to leave, he caught an exchange between the Captain and First Officer as Kirk glanced over at them, and that look spoke volumes. Suddenly McCoy was not so sure that Kirk had pulled through on his own. He turned back and looked at the Vulcan. Spock, moving to his computers, saw McCoy staring at him and raised an inquiring eyebrow. McCoy looked at Kirk who was absorbed in reading a report. Shaking his head silently, he left, his confusion about Spock's place in the situation unabated.

The Vulcan watched him go, aware of McCoy's mixed feelings. But there was no way he could explain his empathy for Kirk, nor was it a feeling he wished to share. Sighing quietly, he reached forward and activated his computers.





Leonard McCoy sighed deeply as he turned away from the small boy lying in the bed. There was no way they could keep the truth from him any longer. Peter Kirk must be told that his parents were dead, and there was only one person who should do the telling. The doctor had deliberately been putting off this moment, telling himself that Peter wasn't strong enough to stand the shock that knowledge would cause, but knowing in his heart that he was delaying for an entirely different reason.

How much more can you take, Jim? he wondered to himself. How much more grief and suffering will break you? We all have our limits and you are awfully close to the edge of yours. Losing your brother and his wife is bad enough, worse now coming so close to the agony of Edith Keeler, an agony you have hardly had time to face, let alone resolve. Add to that the shock of Spock's blindness, however brief. Now I will be handing you a child whom you will almost destroy before acceptance comes, and there's absolutely nothing I can do to shield either of you.

He went to his office and changed out of his Sickbay clothes, putting on a clean uniform shirt. It didn't make him feel any better. He checked Peter one last time to make sure he was asleep, told the duty nurse to stay with him, then left to find Kirk.

The stragglers were just finishing dinner when McCoy poked his head in. Ever since their encounter with the Guardian, Kirk had been pushing himself relentlessly, stopping only when exhaustion threatened to drop him in his tracks. If he had shed any of the grief of Edith's death, it was not enough to ease the agony. He had appeared almost numb after discovering his brother's dead body. There had been a fleeting instant when his grief had flared, a brief second when he had sagged against the wall and almost given in, McCoy hoping against hope that he would. Then Spock was there, and the mask of non-emotion that Kirk had adopted after they beamed back to the *Enterprise* from the Guardian's planet was once again in place.

Kirk wasn't there. It was only McCoy's threats that had made him go to meals in the first place, and even now McCoy suspected Kirk still missed more than he ate. He headed off down the corridor, hating himself every step of the way.

A half hour later he stood on the bridge - stumped. Kirk was in none of his usual places and no one had seen him. Uhura offered to page him but McCoy shook his head. This was not something someone should be summoned for - even face to face it was not something a man should be asked to do. "No, thank you, Lieutenant. I'll just keep nosing around. I'm bound to bump into him somewhere."

He ended up standing uncertainly in front of Spock's quarters. Would Kirk be here? He didn't want to interrupt anything, yet he had to find him. Firming his resolve, he pressed the buzzer. A few seconds later the door slid open and he heard Spock's deep voice admitting entrance. McCoy walked in cautiously, causing the Vulcan's eyebrow to rise slightly.

"Do you have a problem, Doctor?"

McCoy flushed slightly when he noted that Spock was by himself. "Uh, no, that is, I'm looking for Jim." He tried again. "I can't find him and thought that he might be here."

Spock leaned back in his chair. "I have not seen the captain since our duty shift ended. He feels I am still somewhat fatigued by the after-effects of being possessed by the creatures and ordered me to report to my quarters..."

McCoy frowned. "I wish he'd worry about himself half as much as he worries about the rest of us." He looked at Spock. "Do you have any idea where he'd be? It's very important that I find him, and I'd like him to be alone if at all possible."

Spock's eyes dropped down to his folded hands. "I am sure you will find him alone," he said quietly. "He has shut himself off from everybody."

"I know," said McCoy, hearing the pain in the Vulcan's words. "Humans tend to retreat when they're hurt, Spock. Even someone with an open personality can share only so much. Believe me when I say he knows we're here, even if he's having trouble reaching out."

For a moment Spock remained silent, then he nodded slightly. "I believe you may find him in the herbarium." "The herbarium?"

Spock looked up at him. "He once told me that was the place he went when he was troubled. He said it reminded him of home, of times when trouble didn't exist."

"Thanks," said McCoy softly.

"Doctor..." Spock's voice stopped McCoy in mid-turn. "Please don't do anything more to hurt him."

McCoy couldn't turn back to face what he knew he would see in the Vulcan's eyes. "I'm afraid I have to hurt him, Spock. There isn't any other way." He walked out quickly before Spock had a chance to answer.

The herbarium felt shrouded in gloom when McCoy walked in. The only light present was the soft glow around the viewscreens that dotted the room. It took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust from the brightness of the corridor so he could make out the various plants and gardens which made up the area. The scent of the flowers caused him to breathe deeply, momentarily losing himself and the purpose which had brought him here. Finally he looked around, but he couldn't see very far in the dim light. Slowly he walked forward. He would skirt the room once, then try elsewhere.

"Are you looking for me, Bones?" The quiet voice caused McCoy to jump. Kirk was sitting on a bench on the far side of the room, a seat which offered him privacy even if someone else did come in. The viewscreen across from the bench had been activated and the soft light was gone, replaced by the pattern of distant stars.

"Was I that obvious?" asked McCoy, trying to keep his voice light, wishing he could see Kirk's face.

"Most people who come in here usually turn on the lights if they're trying to find something."

"You didn't." McCoy saw Kirk's head turn, his gaze going out to the blackness of space.

"In order to find something, it's got to be there," he said softly. "What I've lost is gone forever. No light will ever bring it back."

McCoy sat down beside him. There was no response for what Kirk had just said, no easy words. "No," he agreed finally, "but life does go on and pain eases after a time."

Kirk didn't answer, his eyes still on the fleeting stars. McCoy sat silent for a while, then he looked at Kirk. "You've got to let go, Jim. Grief is a human emotion, a very necessary emotion. If you keep holding everything in, it could destroy you."

Kirk stood up and walked a short distance away, then stopped to touch a flower. "You know," he said in a near whisper, "it's still hard to believe Sae's gone. We were never what you would call close; guess the ten years between us made it impossible." He turned back to McCoy, his voice growing stronger. "But he was always there, Bones. He might have laughed at me, at my ambitions, but when I needed someone after Dad died, he was there for me. He gave me the support and confidence I needed when I wasn't sure where I was going." He smiled sadly. "We didn't see much of each other over the years, but there was a sort of security in just knowing he was out there."

"And now you feel alone," said McCoy.

Kirk looked away and walked over to the viewscreen. "No," he said, his hand resting on the wall. "I don't feel alone - I don't feel. There isn't anything. No sadness, no pain..." He turned around. "When Edith died, I thought I would too. Then Sae was lying at my feet - Aurelan's screams stayed with me until..."

"Until what?" prompted McCoy when Kirk fell silent.

Kirk looked at him as if he had never seen him before. "What are you doing here?"

"What?" McCoy was confused by the sudden change.

"You came looking for me. Why?"

McCoy took a gamble. "We haven't finished what we were talking about." McCoy knew Kirk had been thinking about Spock. The Vulcan was still alive. In the middle of death and hopelessness Spock was still alive, still there and still an important part of Kirk's life. If only Kirk would talk about what Spock's blindness had cost him on top of everything else...

Kirk continued staring at him and McCoy could feel the wall building. His gamble hadn't worked. "Your nephew will be well enough to be released from Sickbay soon," he said finally.

"And?"

"I think he should know about his parents before someone inadvertently lets it out."

Kirk nodded slowly. "I'll be there in the morning."

"Jim, if there's anything..."

"There isn't," said Kirk quietly. "Goodnight, Bones."



"Uncle Jim!" Peter Kirk shoved his breakfast tray aside and bounced out of bed, flinging his arms around Kirk's neck. "I didn't know I was on your ship until Dr. McCoy told me this morning. Could you show me around? I've never been on a starship before. Dad's told me all about them. Can he and Mom come on the tour as well? Mom's a lot more interested in that sort of thing than most mothers are. Can I sit in the command chair...?"

"Whoa," said Kirk as he swung the boy off the ground. "Calm down!" He plopped Peter back onto the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, even Dr. McCoy says so." He looked at Kirk. "Have you seen Dad and Mom yet?"

Kirk's feeling of nothing was suddenly gone, and the knifing pain of loss stabbed through him. He sat down on the bed. "Peter," he said quietly, "do you remember anything that happened?"

"We were running from something." His eyes started filling with tears, just as Kirk knew his own eyes were already full. "Dad was...he was..."

"Your father is dead, Peter," said Kirk. "He died trying to protect you and your mother."

"He's..." Peter's voice died away. He swallowed hard. "Mom's...she's dead too, isn't she?"

Kirk nodded. "We did all we could, but we were too late." For a minute Peter sat silent, the tears starting to trickle down his face. Kirk couldn't stand to watch and took the boy into his arms. "Don't try to be brave, Peter. Go ahead and cry."

When McCoy looked in a few minutes later, it almost broke his heart. Peter was wrapped in his uncle's arms, crying out his terrible anguish. But it was not Peter who most affected McCoy. It was the look on Kirk's face as he talked softly to the young boy in his arms - the naked pain and loss that was stamped on the face that looked almost as young as the boy he was comforting. Sensing McCoy's presence, Kirk looked up. Even if his face hadn't betrayed him, the hazel eyes would have.

You're not numb any more, thought McCoy. *Your hurt is as painful as salt in an open wound.* He moved forward. "Sleep is the best thing for him now, Jim." He put his hand on Kirk's shoulder, trying in the simple gesture to give support where none could really be given.

Kirk nodded slightly and started to get up, but Peter clutched him harder. "Don't leave me," he sobbed.

"Please..."

"I'm not going anywhere, Peter," said Kirk, desperately trying to keep his own voice steady. "I want you to lie down and let Dr. McCoy give you something to help you sleep. Here, I'll hold your hand..." Kirk eased Peter down, carefully not letting go of his hand.

"You'll stay?" Peter's voice was close to panic.

"I'll stay," said Kirk. He looked at McCoy, his eyes pleading with the doctor to hurry.

"This won't hurt a bit," said McCoy gently, "and you'll feel a lot better when you wake up." He pressed the hypo against Peter's shoulder and waited in silence until the boy's eyes closed and he was safely asleep. Then he looked up at Kirk. "Come on, Jim."

"I can't leave him, Bones."

"He'll be asleep for at least twelve hours. Don't worry, you'll be here when he wakes up."

Reluctantly Kirk let go of Peter's hand and followed McCoy, turning twice to look back at the small, sleeping figure. Finally, McCoy took hold of Kirk's arm and steered him into his office. "When did you last eat?" he asked after he had pushed Kirk into a chair.

"Eat?"

"Yeah, you know that ritual of putting food into your mouth and swallowing it."

"Very funny," said Kirk.

"Well?"

"Uh, I think I had breakfast yesterday."

"You think. Did you go to bed last night? No, don't bother answering." He rummaged around in his desk and got out some crackers. "Here, eat these." He looked up into Kirk's rebellious eyes. "I'm going to give you a stiff drink in a minute and I don't want you to fall on your face. Then you are going to your quarters and get some sleep."

"Anything else?" asked Kirk with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"As a matter of fact, yes. You've got some leave coming. I think you should take Peter home."

"Home?"

McCoy nodded. "He shouldn't be handed to strangers when he's got family. Take him home to Iowa. His grand-

mother's there. What would she say if you didn't?"

Kirk looked numbly at the cracker in his hand. "Home," he said softly. He looked up in surprise as McCoy stuffed the cracker into his mouth.

"Chew it," he ordered, "while I get you a drink." He shoved the other crackers at Kirk. "Call Spock and tell him he has the con." He went into the other room and listened with satisfaction as Kirk turned command over to the Vulcan. Kirk was eating another cracker when McCoy returned. He accepted the glass and downed the brandy in one gulp. "Hey," said McCoy, "that's classy stuff you just chug-a-lugged."

"So are these crackers," retorted Kirk.

McCoy smiled. "You okay?"

Kirk smiled slightly. *No. I'm far from okay and you know it,* he thought. He slowly got to his feet. "I'll take that nap, Doctor. Just make sure I'm there when Peter wakes up."

"You'll be there," promised McCoy as he got to his feet and started walking with Kirk to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Kirk suspiciously.

"With you. You have a habit of being easily sidetracked and I want to be sure you end up in your quarters, and in bed."

Kirk grumbled all the way but McCoy didn't pay any attention. He leaned against the divider in Kirk's quarters, watching Kirk take off his boots.

"All right, are you satisfied now?"

"Not quite. Lie down." Kirk threw him a disparaging look, then lay back. McCoy shook out a blanket and draped it over him.

"Hey!" Kirk jumped as the hypo hissed against his arm. "That's not fair!"

"If you say so, Captain," said McCoy cheerfully as Kirk's eyes started to close. "I'll be back in a few hours to wake you," he said as Kirk drifted off. "Get some sleep while you can, Jim," he added softly as he stood looking down at the drawn, exhausted face. "It may be your last for some time." He tucked the blanket around Kirk, then turned and left quietly.



As the days passed, Peter became a fixture at Kirk's side. The *Enterprise* was headed in for R & R and resupply at Starbase 4. She had been out on patrol for a long time. From there, Kirk would catch a ship for Earth and take Peter home. He had already heard from his mother - she was waiting with open arms.

Peter was bouncing back from the shock of his parents' death, once more becoming the outgoing character that Kirk remembered. Kirk was grateful to the entire crew for the time they spent with Peter, making sure he was never left alone during those times when he couldn't be with his uncle. Kirk had a cot put in his quarters, not wanting Peter to be by himself. He knew from experience just how long a night could be.

"Made all your arrangements, Jim?" asked McCoy as he set his dinner tray down.

Kirk nodded. "We'll get to Starbase 4 late tonight. Peter and I leave first thing in the morning."

"Well, we'll miss you, young fellow," said McCoy ruffling Peter's hair.

"Thank you, sir," said Peter, flushing a little. "It'll be nice to see earth again."

McCoy noticed Kirk's face tighten as Peter spoke. "You'll enjoy yourself, Jim," he said.

Kirk's eyes showed his skepticism but it didn't sound in his voice. "We're going to have a fine time and just think, Bones, you're going to have a two-week break from your grumpy Captain."

"You're not grumpy, Uncle Jim!" protested Peter.

"No," agreed McCoy with a grin, "impossible sometimes, but not grumpy." He fell silent as Spock joined them and watched with satisfaction as Kirk ate another substantial meal. *At least something good has come out of this,* he thought. *Looking after Peter has made Jim have to let go of his own problems. Hopefully by the time he gets back, he will have made peace with himself.*



As the passenger aircar flew closer to its destination, Peter grew quiet, a little afraid of the future, not wanting to lose his uncle yet knowing that Kirk had to leave him behind. Kirk was lost in his own memories. Like Peter, he was a little afraid of what he was going to meet, but he was afraid of the past, not the future. There were memories here, perhaps too many; his control was tenuous. Peter had forced him to continue to bury his raging emotions, but in a few minutes he would be facing his mother, then going to the house which held so many memories. He felt absolutely drained and knew he would not be able to take much more without breaking.

Kirk felt Peter press close and put his arm around the boy. "Nervous?" he asked.

"A little. I don't remember Grandea very well."

Kirk smiled. "She's quite a lady, Peter. You'll like her."

"I hope so. I remember Dad...." His voice broke a little. "I remember him saying she was really sad when he and Mom left for Earth Colony 2 Research Station."

"She wasn't really sad at them, Peter. Your grandmother is rather old-fashioned in some ways. She's never been away from Earth and doesn't really understand why anyone else would want to be."

"Was she sad at you too?"

Kirk looked out the window at the passing countryside, seeing in his mind the tear-stained face that had bid him farewell that first time. "No, she wasn't sad. By the time I went, she had gone through it with everyone else. I guess she was resigned to the fact that I was going and there was nothing she could do to stop me." He felt the aircar start to slow down. "We'd better get our stuff together."

Kirk knew his mother would be waiting for them under the large viewscreen that flashed arrivals and departures. All the times he had returned from school, from the Academy, on shore leaves, she would always be there. He guided Peter through the throngs of people, not noticing the looks his uniform brought as people noted his rank, not noticing the expressions on their faces. It was Spock who had pointed out to him how he stood out in a crowd, and he had been surprised, but he still rarely noticed.

"There she is, Peter," he said, spotting a waving figure. He took the boy's hand and led him over. "Hello, Mom," he said, enveloping her in a bear hug. "Sosh you're looking good."

"Flattery will get you into trouble; I've told you that before," said Mrs. Kirk with a laugh. Then she turned to Peter. "You've brought me a young man, Jim." She gave him a hug and a kiss. "Welcome home, Peter."

"It's nice to have a home to come to," said Peter in a slightly shaky voice, his hand once again reaching for Kirk's.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Kirk. "I've been trying to pound that into everyone's head for years. Home had always been here." She smiled as she put her arm around Peter. "Dinner's on, so we'd better get going." She took a sharp look at Kirk's haggard face but said nothing. Her easy chatter filled the time between the station and the farm the Kirk family still called home. Peter quickly warmed to her, and Kirk found he could safely retreat into himself.

"I aired out your old room, Jim. I thought perhaps Peter would like it as his own. I hope you don't mind."

Kirk brought himself back to the present with an effort. "Uh, no, that's fine."

"It's the biggest one and since you don't get home that often anymore, I figured you wouldn't mind using the guest room." As she was talking, the small aircar skimmed into the yard and settled onto the landing area.

The old home was unchanged. The weatherguard framing the house was as white as ever, the dark, thermal shutters open to admit the warm summer breeze. The yard and gardens were perfect - one of Mrs. Kirk's continuing passions.

"I have a couple of outside people running the farm," she said as they walked up the steps to the house. "It's too much for me now. They're here every day - good workers, too." She took off her coat. "Jim, could you show Peter around? Dinner will be a burnt crisp if I don't look after things in the kitchen."

Kirk took Peter upstairs and showed him where everything was. Peter fell in love with Kirk's old room immediately. "Wow, you've even got a crawlspace in the cupboard," he said, emerging from his exploring. "Gee, Uncle Jim, I'd forgotten how neat Grandma is."

"I'll agree with that," said Kirk. "Look, get changed and washed up, then head for the kitchen, okay?"

"Sure thing," said Peter.

Kirk shut the door to the guest room and leaned back against it, unable to stop the trembling of his body. He couldn't go through with this. He was going to break down in front of Peter, in front of his mother. There were too many reminders of Sam, of his father, and ever-present in his mind was the image of Edith, and how she had died.

"Uncle Jim, I'm ready!"

Kirk clenched his hands into fists. "So on down, Peter. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay."

Kirk heard the clomping of feet as Peter went down the stairs two at a time. Blindly he headed for the bathroom as he felt the tears start. He couldn't let go! He fumbled for the cold water and doused his face until the ache in his throat started to lessen.

"Jim, dinner's ready!"

"Be right down, Mom!" He quickly dried his face, then went back into the bedroom. His favorite pair of old jeans were set out for him. He smiled slightly as he touched them. It had been a long time since they had last been worn.

Peter chattered all through dinner, excited at being home and relieved to discover he really was wanted. However, exhaustion finally got the best of him and his grandmother took him off to bed.

Kirk wandered out onto the large front porch and sat down in the old-fashioned love seat that had been there

for as long as he could remember. The noises of the frogs and crickets filled his ears, sounds he hadn't heard for a long time. He sat back and let the peace of the moment sink right to his soul.

Finally his mother came out to join him. She sat beside him and the two of them rocked quietly in the silence. Gradually Kirk realized his mother was crying.

"Mom?"

She shook her head, trying to deny her tears. "I swore I wouldn't do this," she said. "You would think I'd be used to the idea of death by now. But Sam and Aurelan - and poor Peter..."

"He has you, Mom," said Kirk softly, "and now you will have someone with you."

"I know, I know." She impatiently dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, then took hold of his hand. "It's not only Peter who upsets me, Jim. Do you have any idea what you looked like when I first saw you today?"

"Tired? Scruffy?" said Kirk in a teasing voice.

"It won't work. You can't fool your own mother. I saw more than what others were seeing, the handsome, young starship captain..."

"Mom, now really..."

"Don't interrupt. I know you, strangers don't. Jim, what's wrong? You've been away from Earth an awfully long time."

I only wish I had been, Kirk thought. *Those days I spent with Edith were so wonderful, and so terrible...*

"There, you've got that look again," stated Mrs. Kirk.

"Mom," said Kirk gently, knowing he could never tell her what happened, "you're being a mother again. I'm thirty-three years old..."

"You're still my son."

Yes, thought Kirk, *and I wish with all my heart that I could curl up in your arms and cry the way Peter cried in mine. But it's too much hurt. It's too much for me and I know it would be too much for you. You can heal a child's pain - I have to deal with my own.* "I know," he said with a smile.

"You're not going to tell me what's bothering you, are you?"

He took her hand in both of his. "Dad once told me you were his rock, but he was afraid he was going to wear the rock away by the way he constantly worried you. I don't want that to happen. Please believe me when I say I'm all right."

They looked at each other, their hazel eyes a match. A small smile touched his face as he saw her start to relent. "You are impossible," she said finally.

"So you've told me before," he said, his smile widening. "Well, I, for one, am heading for bed. I have to leave in the morning."

"So soon?"

He nodded. "The *Enterprise* has a two week lay-over, but it takes nearly that long to get back and forth to Starbase 4."

"I hate Starbases. I hate starships..."

"Mom, please. Let's not get into that again. Neither of us is going to change..."

"Jim, you're all I've got left."

Once again Kirk could feel his fragile control slipping. "You've got Peter," he said as he got to his feet, "and you'll always have my love." He kissed her on the forehead. "See you in the morning."

He was still awake when his mother tiptoed into the room. He lay with his eyes shut as she tucked the covers around him and gently kissed him, then stole quietly out again. He bit his knuckles hard to stop the tears that threatened to flow.



"Jee, there's someone on the viewer - says he's from Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco!"

Kirk pried open heavy eyelids. At first he couldn't imagine where he was. His mother's voice had fitted nicely into his dream which happened occasionally, but when he woke up, he was usually on the *Enterprise*.

"Jim?" A knock came on the door, then his mother poked her head in. "Are you awake?"

"I'm not sure."

His mother seiled. "Come on, get up. Apparently it's rather urgent."

Kirk groaned. "Everything is urgent to Fleet Headquarters." He started to swing out of bed, then remembered he didn't have anything on, and stopped. "Uh, could you tell them I'll be right there?"

His mother grinned at his obvious embarrassment. "Okay, but hurry up."

Kirk hastily pulled on his jeans and went down the stairs in huge leaps. Admiral Komack was patiently waiting. "Good morning, sir. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Quite all right," said Komack, making an effort to ignore Kirk's unusual state of dress. "You're a rather hard man to track down, Captain. Your First Officer was somewhat reluctant to say where you had gone."

I know Spock doesn't like Komack, thought Kirk to himself, *but that seems a rather unusual reaction. Wonder what caused it?* He looked at the viewscreen. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"We'd like you to come to San Francisco. The *Enterprise* has been ordered to come here to pick you up, rather than waiting for you to return to Starbase 4."

"But we're due back on patrol..."

"The *Excalibur* is free; she will take your patrol until you report back to your sector. When can you get here?"

"Well, I was planning to leave this morning..."

"Good. We'll expect you here at 1400 hours. Until then..." The viewscreen flicked off, leaving Kirk feeling a bit bewildered.

"Trouble, Jim?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so. I've been ordered to go to San Francisco for some reason." He looked toward the kitchen. "Boy, something sure smells good."

"I'm fixing waffles, with real maple syrup." She looked at his half-dressed state. "I don't know what is accepted in the service nowadays, but in this house you still have to wear shoes and a shirt to meals!"

Kirk gave her a hug. "I'll be down in a minute, and I want a double order. Is Peter up yet?"

"No, I thought it might be a good idea to let him sleep. He's a pretty exhausted boy." She looked at her son. "As are you."

He couldn't answer, only nodded, then headed back up the stairs. He took a quick shower and put on a clean uniform. He would have to leave right after breakfast. Hopefully, he would be able to say his goodbyes to a sleepy child and get away with no hysterics.



"They did what?" McCoy felt his legs buckling and landed with a thud into the chair behind his desk.

Spock took a deep breath, waiting for his own anger to fade a little, anger which had started as he stood in front of Admiral Komack while the man had told him of Kirk's orders, what had happened, and asked for his help. "They used Jim as bait for a trap, but something went wrong."

"Something went wrong?" McCoy looked a little closer at Spock. "You'd better sit down before you do anything funny."

Spock looked irritated, but sat down nonetheless.

"Okay, now tell me what happened."

"Over the past year, elements hostile to Starfleet and the Federation have consistently known things there should have been no way they could have found out. Starfleet did a thorough internal investigation from Admiral Komack's office and found nothing. They finally decided to bait a trap and Komack thought that Jim would be the most effective man to carry it out. They let it leak that Jim had very important information, information that certain factions would go to any lengths to obtain."

"And?"

"They got the information."

"They broke him?"

"Not precisely. He was supposed to give the information..." Spock got up, his anger making it impossible to sit still. "But they didn't stop there. They tortured him - plain, brutal torture. Then they dumped him out in the street, apparently thinking he would die before anyone found him."

"Oh, my god," said McCoy softly. "Where is he now?"

"In the Medical Complex at Starfleet Headquarters."

"Did you see him?"

Spock nodded. "He doesn't know that I did. He's in intensive care - I was in the observation area." He closed his eyes, his anguish plainly visible.

"Damn," swore McCoy. "Jim was in no shape to take on something like that! As hurt and confused as he was when he left the *Enterprise*, it's no wonder he didn't refuse such a rotten assignment." He ran his hand over his face. "I was hoping going home would help ease some of the pain. What have I done to him?"

Spock turned at the sound in McCoy's voice. "You are not to blame, Doctor. Perhaps no one is."

"His condition?"

"Not very good," said Spock grimly. "They've sent for his mother."

McCoy frowned as he got to his feet. If they had sent for Kirk's mother he must be in pretty poor shape.

"Well, being the *Enterprise's* Chief Medical Officer, I'd better get down there. I'll call you as soon as I know anything."



The small room was brightly lit, as were all the intensive care cubicles. Kirk lay on his right side, a small cover strategically placed over the middle of his body, leaving everything else exposed. His right arm was out in front of him, strapped firmly to the bed, a tube running from it to a machine which was programmed to keep his body fluids balanced and feed nutrients at specified intervals. A criss-cross brand of stripes was burned into his chest and back, and down his legs. Both of his eyes were black and swollen, and McCoy could see the pale marks left by the laser seal. Kirk's face must have been a mess when they found him.

McCoy closed the door softly behind him, then walked to the side of the bed. He momentarily flicked on the K-3 pain indicator. The arrow quickly rose straight to the top of the panel. Gently he put his hand on Kirk's forehead - it was burning. He glanced down at the report in his hand. The simple medical terms could not touch on what he saw in front of him.

Kirk stirred slightly as McCoy took his hand away. "Water..." His voice was raspy and weak. McCoy got a glass and slipped the straw into Kirk's mouth. From Kirk's efforts, it was obviously very painful to swallow.

"That's enough, Jim," said McCoy eventually.

Kirk tensed as he recognized McCoy's voice. "Bones?" He managed to open his eyes slightly. "Said you..."

"Stay quiet," said McCoy. "We're all here. The *Enterprise* is in orbit, Spock's on the rampage..."

"Mustn't...can't see..."

McCoy smiled slightly. Kirk was always trying to protect Spock from the pain of his injuries, knowing how much it cost the Vulcan. "He already has," he said gently. He looked at the burns that marked Kirk's body. "You look like you were put on a grill."

"W...was."

McCoy felt his stomach lurch. What kind of sick mind would do something like this to another living being? "Well, I'm here now," he said lamely. "Being the only person who knows how to treat you properly, I expect to be popping in and out rather frequently."

Kirk's eyes had shut again but he painfully lifted his left hand and weakly gripped McCoy's arm. McCoy put his hand over Kirk's. No words were needed - none were adequate.

McCoy waited until Kirk had drifted off into a state somewhere between sleep and unconsciousness before he left. He knew the machines surrounding Kirk could probably monitor him more efficiently, but McCoy firmly believed in the human element. He had often seen it make the difference between life and death.

He quietly closed the door behind him, then stopped to talk to the duty nurse. As he turned away, he saw a woman sitting in one of the small cubicles. He looked back at the nurse, his eyebrow on the rise.

"That's the patient's mother, Doctor."

Both of McCoy's eyebrows rose. He wouldn't have recognized the slight woman as Jim's mother. There seemed to be little resemblance. He made his way across the room. "Mrs. Kirk?"

The face that looked up at him was not Jim's, but the eyes were pure Kirk - large, luminous hazel eyes that could belong to no other person. "Yes?"

McCoy held out his hand. "Leonard McCoy," he said with a smile. "Jim's doctor - and friend."

"Oh, Dr. McCoy! Jim has spoken of you often." She got to her feet. "Is he...is he going to be all right? They didn't tell me very much, just that it was important that I get here as soon as possible."

McCoy sensed this lady would stand for as little nonsense as did her son. "He's badly hurt, Mrs. Kirk, but he's...he's got a lot of fight..."

"But not as much as usual?"

"M'am?" McCoy suddenly realized where Jim had acquired that uncanny sixth sense.

"Jim is my baby, Doctor. He's never been able to hide much from me. Oh, he didn't say anything when he was home, but I knew something was wrong. He seemed so lost somehow..."

"He's had more than his fair share of lumps recently," said McCoy, "but he'll bounce back - he always does. He's sleeping now. Why don't you sit with him for a while. I'd feel better knowing there was someone with him."

"Man over machine, Doctor?" said Mrs. Kirk with a light smile. "Jim told me you were wonderfully old-fashioned."

"Well, I don't know that I would exactly put it that way," said McCoy with a grin. "Come on."

Mrs. Kirk paled when she saw how badly injured her son was, but McCoy quickly realized she could cope with the shock. He left with a quiet word of encouragement, heading off to talk with the head of the Burn Unit.

For a long time she sat by the bed, her heart aching at the sound of Kirk's ragged breathing. He never once

moved, never once opened his eyes. She started to wonder if he even knew she was there. With some hesitation, she reached out and took his hand in both of hers. "I'm here, Jim," she said softly. "I know you have the best of care, but nothing can substitute for a mother."

He didn't answer, nor had she really expected him to. She sat, his cold hand held in her warm ones, willing to stay in that position for as long as he needed her.

Kirk gradually became aware of the warm hands and wondered who was there. It wasn't Spock; he knew that touch well. He looked up from under his lashes and saw the last person he had expected to see. A quick breath caught in his throat and he clamped his eyes shut. He felt a soft hand brush his cheek, wiping away the lone tear that had escaped.

"Jim?"

There was no way he could answer - the tightness in his chest was being caused by more than the severe pain of the burns. He fought against himself for long minutes, then gave in, his fingers wrapping around her hand. He needed her, there was no use trying to deny the truth. Slowly a feeling of security descended and he fell asleep, the first undrugged sleep he had managed since they had found him dying in the filthy street.



McCoy had no trouble being assigned as Kirk's personal physician. It was going to take more than just a physical recovery from what Kirk had undergone - he was going to have to overcome the emotional reaction as well. Doctors were necessary; a friend was even more important.

Kirk made very slow improvement. He withdrew from everyone, lying silent in his agony. Admiral Komack was on the warpath to find out what had happened, but there was no way McCoy would let him anywhere near intensive care.

McCoy made sure Kirk was never left alone. At some point he was going to have to talk, for his own mental stability if for no other reason. The wicked burns still stood out in startling relief on his body, accented by the plasti-shield that was sprayed over them to help prevent infection. Twice a day the plasti-shield had to be removed, the burns treated, then the shield reapplied, an agony which could only be guessed at - Kirk never made a sound while it was being done.



McCoy and Spock put their trays down on the table. They had just left Kirk with his mother and were taking a much needed break. McCoy slowly ate while Spock toyed with his soup.

"You not eating, Spock?" he asked finally.

Spock looked at him. "Why isn't Jim any better?"

"He's healing; there hasn't been any infection..."

"That's not what I'm talking about," said Spock. "I've watched him lying there - so have you. Is that the Jim Kirk either of us knows?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, no it isn't."

"Why?"

"Spock, he's been through a lot, more than most men could take - Edith's death, his brother and sister-in-law. Then..." Quickly he broke off, realizing what he had almost said.

"Then what?"

"Nothing. It's not important."

"Doctor, you lie most unconvincingly."

McCoy looked up at the Vulcan. He never wanted Spock to know unless Kirk told him, but it was too late now and Spock wasn't about to let him change the subject. "He blames himself for causing your blindness," he said abruptly.

"He caused...? But I'm not...it wasn't permanent."

"No, but it was the last straw. He held up against everything, even that. Then when you were suddenly there again, alive and whole, it was too much. That's when he fell apart."

"He fell apart?"

"Uh, huh. Not outwardly, and no one who didn't know him well would have seen any signs, but that's why I sent him home in the first place. He had to get away from all of us. One more blow would have been one too many..." He rubbed his hand over his tired eyes. "I wish I could be sure he didn't do this to punish himself."

Spock looked at him sharply. "Someone else tortured him."

McCoy met Spock's eyes. "He volunteered for this assignment. Its dangers were clearly spelled out. He knew he was on the edge of mental and physical exhaustion. Does it sound like a sensible move to you?"

Spock stared at him for a minute. He had not known this had been a voluntary mission. "No," he said quietly, "it was not a sensible move."

"Well," said McCoy picking up his tray, "I'm going to have to play devil's advocate. Jim's got to start

talking."

"I'll come with you..."

"No," said McCoy gently, "thanks for offering, but I think it would be a good idea if only one of us did this. He'll get angry, probably very angry. At least when he turns away from me, he'll be able to turn to you. However, I'd appreciate it if you'd make sure a correct transcript was taken. I don't want him to have to go through this twice."

Spock nodded. "I shall be nearby if you need me."

"Thanks. Let's just be sure his mother isn't. She wouldn't like what she'd see." He got slowly to his feet. "You would think that having suffered as much as he's done, Starfleet would leave Jim alone instead of hounding him every single moment. The blasted military machine doesn't leave room for individuals."

"You have often said it is important not to hold everything in."

"It is, but to have to relive a horror such as Jim went through..."

"Do you not think he already is?" asked Spock quietly.

When they got back to intensive care, Admiral Komack was waiting for them.

"McCoy," he said with no preliminary greeting, "I can't wait any longer. The information Kirk gave has already been acted on. I've got to find out what he knows!"

McCoy looked at Spock, then nodded. "All right. Spock, would you come with us? Nurse I would appreciate it if you would accompany Mrs. Kirk to dinner."

"Yes, Doctor."

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly. This was not at all what McCoy had been planning to do. However, he picked up a recorder. McCoy had said that he didn't want Kirk to have to go through this twice. He assumed he had not changed his mind on that score.

Just before they went into Kirk's room, McCoy turned to Komack. "Just one thing, Admiral. I will do the questioning and when I say stop, we stop. Understood?"

Komack nodded. Spock glanced from one to the other. He knew McCoy meant what he said, but he had also run into Komack's stubbornness, as had Kirk on many occasions. This could be a real battle.

When they walked in, Spock heard a quiet gasp come from Komack. He had not seen Kirk before, and the burns were standing red and raw in the small room's bright light, accented by the plasti-shield.

"Admiral, if you will sit over here," directed McCoy. Then he walked over to Kirk and put his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Jim?" There was no response. He shook Kirk slightly. "Jim, listen to me. It's time to talk."

Finally Kirk opened his eyes and looked at McCoy. The swelling had subsided but the bruises still showed dark and sore. But the eyes that looked at McCoy, then at Spock and Komack, were the eyes of a stranger - there was nothing there to reveal the man they knew. However, something in the tension of Kirk's body told McCoy that Kirk would try.

McCoy glanced over at Spock and nodded. Spock started the recorder and waited, hardly daring to breathe. "Jim," said McCoy, turning back to Kirk, "I don't want to make this difficult for you. Take your time - tell us what you remember."

Kirk looked at the tube running into his arm, then slowly clenched his fist. "I was home..."

"Why?" asked Komack.

"Admiral," said McCoy fiercely, "I warned you!"

Kirk didn't appear to notice the interruption. "I was bringing my dead...bringing my brother's son home..."

That's the last thing he needs to remember, thought McCoy. "Jim, we know that. What happened after you were called to Headquarters, after Admiral Komack told you of the problem he was having?"

"Security information was being leaked," said Kirk, "an internal investigation found nothing. I agreed to a plan which would expose me as a possible target of those people who had been obtaining the information. I was interviewed on the Starfleet news program that evening. I let slip that I had been summoned for the purpose of taking new scientific information to Draden."

"And then?" prompted McCoy as Kirk fell silent.

"On my way back to Headquarters, I stopped at the Quarter Cell, a restaurant that was frequented by Starfleet personnel. Since it was agreed that this information must have been taken out by someone in Starfleet, I thought it would be best to stick to those places where I could be easily found, if someone wanted to find me. I ordered several drinks, then had dinner."

"Were you alone all this time?"

"Up to the point where I was just finishing eating..." He hesitated.

"Yes?" prompted McCoy.

"I'm not really clear. I remember feeling rather peculiar. Everything started moving slowly..." He shifted restlessly.

"Take it easy," said McCoy, putting his hand on Kirk's arm. "Just tell us what is clear to you at the moment."

Kirk took a deep breath. "A room, a couple of chairs, a table made of some sort of metal..." His voice was shaking. "High up over the table was another metal slab, the same size as the table..." He broke off, panic clearly visible in his eyes. Instantly McCoy pulled out a hypo and pressed it against Kirk's shoulder.

"Doctor?" McCoy looked up at Komack's voice.

"A mild tranquilizer, Admiral. Memories can be powerful, especially this type."

"He's strong enough to go on?"

"I think it would be best if he did," said McCoy. "If he can get this out without us pushing him too hard..." He touched Kirk again. "What else, Jim?"

Kirk's eyes had gone blank again, the tranquilizer helping to control the fear. "I remember being shoved into one of the chairs. Then a man came into the room..."

"What did he look like?"

"Very ordinary, the type of person you would pass on the street without a second glance. He had seen the newscast..."

"Doctor, we need a better description..."

"Admiral, take what you're given!" said McCoy, cutting him off.

"I can't remember anything about him," said Kirk. "I've been trying..."

"You've been trying?" said Komack in disbelief.

"Admiral!" said McCoy. "One more interruption..." He turned back to Kirk. "Go on, Jim," he said gently.

"He said he knew me and he knew I was stubborn. He said he was going to break me."

McCoy took a deep breath. "Did he?"

"He got the information..."

"He was supposed to get the information," broke in Komack.

"Admiral Komack!"

"Be quiet, Dr. McCoy! Captain Kirk, did you or did you not break?"

Kirk slowly sat up for the first time, visibly shaking with pain and anger. "He got the information I was sent to give, Admiral, but he wanted more and I wouldn't give it. To get what he already had, he had reduced my face to pulp, but he wasn't satisfied. He said I knew more, that there was a reason why I had been given this particular information. They stripped me, Admiral, and they tied me to that table. Do you know what that table was? It was a human grill..."

"Jim," said McCoy, "that's enough for now. Come on, lie down."

"Damn it, McCoy, you told me I had to talk, so let me talk!" He looked back at Komack. "They tied me face down and they closed that metal until I was squashed under the weight, then they turned it on. Do you have any idea of what smelling your own burning flesh does to you? Do you have any idea of the agony of being held motionless while your flesh is burned from you in strips? No, you bastard, you don't know and you couldn't care less! Well, for your information, I didn't break. I wouldn't give you the satisfaction of having it happen!"

"Jim, that's enough!" said McCoy sharply. "Spock, get Komack out of here!" McCoy was busy with Kirk but he didn't miss the fact that Spock practically carried Komack out, giving the Admiral no chance to argue. Kirk collapsed into McCoy's arms, his anger turning to weakness and exhaustion. McCoy rang for the nurse. Together they got Kirk settled but the panel readings continued to fluctuate wildly. "Damn," muttered McCoy. "Stay with him, Nurse. I'll be right back."

Spock was physically barring Komack from entering Kirk's room. McCoy almost barrelled into the Vulcan as he came storming out, his eyes blazing. "I told you not to push! What the hell were you trying to do?"

"Discover the truth," replied Komack. "Men in great pain rarely lie, Doctor. He didn't break, but I had to be sure." He sat down on the corner of the nurses' desk. "Now I have another problem."

McCoy looked at Spock. "Would you stay with Jim for a minute?" he asked. "I want someone he knows with him." Spock nodded and immediately left. "All right, Admiral," he said, turning back to Komack, "what is your problem?"

"I have just received the report you logged on the *Enterprise*, the one that you told me you'd send when I talked to you on Starbase 4 - the one concerning Kirk's recent medical history..."

"You only just received it?"

Komack nodded. "Somehow it got sidetracked. I have no idea if it was deliberate or an accident. Doctor, I would like to know just how badly stressed Kirk was before this happened, and I would like your honest opinion of

his chances for recovery."



Kirk was still very agitated when McCoy got back to his room. He injected more tranquilizers and waited until Kirk finally fell asleep. He stood looking down at Kirk, his eyes full of pain. "What the hell did I expect to accomplish by doing this?"

"He needed to talk, Doctor, and I believe Admiral Komack got the information he wanted."

"I hope so," said McCoy. "Another session like that and we won't have anything left to question. How much can one person take?"

He was interrupted by Mrs. Kirk arriving back from dinner. "Is he all right?" she asked anxiously, looking at the ragged emotion which still showed on Kirk's face, despite the fact he was asleep.

Spock looked at McCoy over the top of her head, wondering what McCoy was going to do. "Yes, he is," said McCoy, "and I've given him a sedative so he'll get a good night's sleep. I think this is a chance for all of us to do the same." He glanced over at Spock, who nodded. "Will you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to your room?" asked McCoy, gallantly offering his arm to Mrs. Kirk.

She looked at her son for a moment. "He's so hurt," she said quietly. "Ever since he said he wanted to go to the Academy, I've been terrified for him. His father died in the service. I thought that by keeping him on Earth he would be safe, that space was the place of unknown dangers. Now I see him here like this, I see the reality of his life..."

"Come on," said McCoy gently, "you'll feel better in the morning. We're all wound a little tight at the moment."

Mrs. Kirk looked at Spock. "You'll stay with him? I hate the idea of him being alone."

"I shall stay," said Spock solemnly.

Truer words were never spoken, thought McCoy. Nothing would get you out of here.



Ten days later, McCoy moved Kirk from intensive care to a suite of rooms. Kirk was not given the normal private room accorded his rank - too much was at stake. The suite could be easily guarded. Kirk wasn't strong enough to fend for himself, not yet. The burns were gradually healing and he was regaining his strength, but he remained subdued and withdrawn, his eyes strangely lifeless.

He seemed most at peace when his mother was with him, so eventually McCoy had her move in. He and Spock had rooms just down the hall. For once, Admiral Komack did not seem perturbed by the fact that a starship was just sitting around doing nothing.

Score one for humanity against the company, thought McCoy. It's something I'd never thought I'd see.

McCoy walked into the room late one afternoon. Kirk and Spock were playing chess, Mrs. Kirk watching them and knitting. All of them had tried everything they could think of to get Kirk out of the deep depression which had a tight grip on him, but, as yet, nothing had worked.

"Hey, Jim," he said cheerfully, "how would you like to go out for dinner tonight?"

Kirk looked up with a slight smile. "Anything's better than that hospital food you keep shoving at me."

"It's nutritious," defended McCoy.

"So is Denebian carpew, but that's not about to make me eat it!"

"Would you mind if I bowed out?" said Kirk's mother with a smile. "I promised Peter I'd call him tonight, and I've got to get this sweater finished for a certain person," she added, smiling fondly at her son.

They went to a popular restaurant of Kirk's choice. "No drinks with the medication you're on, Captain," said McCoy, "but you can have anything on the menu - our treat." They placed their order, then fell silent for a few minutes. McCoy decided to once again try to draw Kirk out. "What's bothering you, Jim?" he asked. "You're healing well, you're stronger. It's almost over..."

"It's almost over," echoed Kirk quietly. He carefully leaned back in his chair, an obvious reminder of the ever present pain caused by the burns. "I don't know what it is, Bones. Call it tired of playing got, tired of pointing my finger and choosing life or death for others." He shuddered. "I condemned Lazarus to worse than death - an endless eternity of hatred and madness. Edith..." His voice caught in his throat. "Why is it always goodness that is maimed or destroyed? What had she ever done?" He looked at McCoy.

"There isn't any answer, Jim. It's called life, or destiny - something like that."

"In each case, Captain, you made the logical choice and the only possible one. It is your humanity that is causing your pain..."

"Is it, Spock? Then why can't I cry for any of them? Why can't I cry for Edith or Sam or even for Peter? All I feel is emptiness." He fell silent for a moment. "Komack practically accused me of deliberately getting myself

into this mess..."

"Jim, he did no such thing!"

Kirk didn't appear to notice McCoy's interruption. "Ever since then, I've had to face the fact that I didn't fight them. I did absolutely nothing to resist."

"Captain, you have said you can't remember all the details," said Spock.

"I know I didn't fight them," said Kirk bluntly, his eyes alarmingly empty of expression. "Did I want to die that badly?"

McCoy swore his heart stopped beating at Kirk's words. "I think maybe we should..." He never finished his sentence. Kirk had looked up at something and frozen, his face turning as white as a sheet.

"Jim?" Spock reached out his hand but Kirk moved too quickly and was out of his chair. He collided with the waiter who was bringing their meal and they both went crashing to the floor. Spock kicked back his chair but Kirk had regained his feet and was backing across the room. Spock looked toward the door where Kirk was staring and saw two men starting to run out.

"McCoy," he said quickly, "follow Jim. Don't lose him!" He raced across the restaurant and out after the two men.

McCoy leapt to his feet and started across the restaurant but was grabbed by the owner. "Now wait just a minute. If you think you can just run out of here leaving a mess like this..." McCoy reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of credits, pushing them at the man. He had no idea how much was there; he was aware only of the precious seconds passing and the fact that Kirk was gone.

"Here," he said fiercely, "that should cover it." He pushed the man aside and ran out, leaving the chaotic mess behind him, but by the time he reached the street, Kirk was nowhere to be seen. A quick search of the area revealed nothing. He ran around to the front of the restaurant but Spock had also disappeared. He flagged down a public aircar and scrambled in, ordering the man to take him to Starfleet Headquarters. They were in real trouble.



Mrs. Kirk heard the footsteps running down the hall. She put down her knitting and went to the door, wondering what was going on.

"Jim, my word, what's happened?"

Her son came stumbling in the door. His clothes were filthy, the knee of his trousers torn and his hands scraped and bleeding. "He's found me," he said, gasping for breath. "I can't go through it again..."

"Who's found you? Jim, there's no one else out there!" She put her arm around his waist. "Come on, let's get you to bed..." They got about halfway across the living room when Kirk sank to the floor. She wasn't strong enough to lift him, so she went down on her knees, hugging him close.

"He said before he would break me," said Kirk in a choked voice. "He said I was going to die and I insisted I would live. He kept trying to find out why, what it was that was so important, but I wouldn't tell him. He said over and over that when he found out he would hold it in front of me and destroy it, when I could do nothing to stop him. Mom, I can't lose him now. I've lost everything else..."

She wrapped her arms around her son and hugged him close. "You're not going to lose anyone," she said softly. She gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. "You're still my baby, Jim, you don't have to play the starship captain here..." She felt him start to tremble and held him tighter. Eventually she felt his tears and knew the crisis had come. She braced herself for the onslaught of pain, braced herself to hear the agonies he had never mentioned.

He rested his head on her shoulder and cried for every fear he had ever known, for every hurt he had ever received. He cried for every person dead under his command. He finally cried the tears that McCoy had so often tried to get him to shed. He cried for the great love he had found, and then destroyed. He cried for his father and his brother. And, finally, he cried for the one person he truly loved, the person he thought he had destroyed, but somehow remained standing at his side. He cried for Spock.



"We've got to find him!" said McCoy, smashing his fist down on the table, causing Admiral Komack to look up at him sharply.

"Indeed we must," said Komack. "If they have him, there is every possibility that he could break, and that we cannot allow."

McCoy looked at him, anger smoldering in his eyes. "For the good of the company - to hell with the man, is that it?"

"That is precisely it," said Komack coldly.

They were interrupted by Spock's sudden arrival, accompanied by one of the Admiral's staff and a security guard. "Commander Spock brought in two men a few minutes ago, Admiral. He says they have something to do with the

security leaks, and believes they have knowledge of what happened to Captain Kirk." He put a tape into the viewer. "You're not going to believe it," he added quietly as he turned the viewscreen on.

Konack's face went white when he saw the image on the screen. Eventually he looked up at Spock. "That man, Commander, is my personal aide, the man who was in charge of investigating the leaks."

"He is also the man who caused Captain Kirk to run from the restaurant," said Spock coldly.

"Excuse me, Admiral," said a yeoman poking her head in the door. "Mrs. Kirk is trying to find either Commander Spock or Dr. McCoy. Captain Kirk is with her."

Spock and McCoy exchanged a quick look. "May we take our leave, sir?" said McCoy immediately.

"Yes, yes," said Konack impatiently. "Brunley, come with me. There's somebody waiting who has a hell of a lot of explaining to do - and many years in which to do it," he added as he passed out the door.



That was quite a dinner, Mrs. Kirk," said McCoy with a sigh as he put down his fork. Three pieces of pie were far more than he normally ate, but it was the best pecan pie he had ever had.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Doctor," said Mrs. Kirk with a smile. "I am so very pleased that you and Mr. Spock could come back to Iowa with us."

McCoy smiled. "Jim's never said much about home, but you can often tell in his eyes that he misses it. Especially when we land on planets that look like this countryside."

Mrs. Kirk shook her head. "No, he misses what he once knew as home. He's a man of space, Doctor, like his father. I've finally come to realize you can't change them, you can only support and encourage their dreams."

McCoy thought about her words for a minute. "Somehow I don't see Jim as a dreamer; he's too much of a man of action. Now a romantic, yes..."

"Don't you? That's funny. Mr. Spock and I were talking earlier and he said one of the very first things he discovered about Jim was that he was a dreamer." She looked down at her hands. "Jim knew a very lovely girl a few years back. She loved him with every fiber of her being, but he found he couldn't return it. Jim is fond of most people; I was hoping he would become more deeply attached to Angelique, maybe forget space and the Academy..."

"I take it that didn't happen," said McCoy.

"No. I asked him about it afterwards. He smiled a little sadly and said something I have never forgotten. 'Mom, she made the mistake of falling in love with a dreamer. No one should ever love a dreamer unless they share those same dreams. It causes too much pain.'"

McCoy didn't know what to say. He looked away, then saw Kirk and Spock walking back from the barn, Peter racing excitedly ahead of them. Mrs. Kirk followed his look, then smiled. "I've always worried about my son, Doctor, worried about the pain and loneliness he had inflicted upon himself. Then I met you, who so obviously cares, and I met someone with whom Jim can finally share those dreams..."

"Grandma, Chickie finally hatched her eggs! She had eight babies!"

"That's wonderful, Peter. We'll have to build her a proper nest so that they'll be safe from the machinery." She looked up as Kirk and Spock walked in together. "I suppose you'll be leaving..."

Kirk nodded. "I'm afraid so. We've kept the *Enterprise* here too long as it is."

"Will you be back soon?"

"I don't know, Mom. I'll try."

"Well, I've got Peter, and I'll always have your love." Kirk smiled at her words. She had finally made her own peace. She looked at Spock and McCoy. "Thank you for looking after this scamp of mine..."

"Mom!"

"It's our pleasure, Ma'am," said McCoy.

"And our privilege," added Spock.

Kirk looked at all of them with exasperation, his eyes falling last on Spock. The annoyance left his face; the dreamer had found his dream in reality.



Breach

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, Captain," came the reply.

Kirk smiled to himself as he watched the helmsman lay in the course. It was a relief to have the past week over with and he was looking forward to their return to the peace of space. The ceremonies on Altair VI were finally over and he would no longer have to be polite to bores and spend most of his time escaping from their wives. He appreciated the attention, but being descended upon by a horde of squawking women was a bit much. He chuckled to himself as he thought of the ruffled dignity of the High Commissioner as he rescued Kirk from the advances of the Commissioner's rather inebriated wife. Actually, he had rather enjoyed it, but obviously the Commissioner had thought otherwise.

His laughter died as an irritating itch started across his chest again. Damn, it was getting annoying. He decided that on the whole he would rather hurt than itch; it was easier to put up with. He gently rubbed his hand over the area, knowing that McCoy would have his head if he were caught. The long cut caused by the lirpa was only just healing and the new skin was still delicate, the muscles underneath just starting to knit together. All through the long ceremonies on Altair, McCoy had practically tied Kirk's hands behind him so he wouldn't injure the fragile skin covering the wound.

Thinking of McCoy reminded Kirk of the problem he had been avoiding. He stood up, his hand still gently rubbing his chest, and turned to his First Officer. "You have the con, Mr. Spock. I'm going to the Sickbay."

Almost immediately, he regretted his words. The Vulcan's eyes darkened to opaque pools of guilt, although nothing in his voice betrayed any emotion. "Acknowledged, Captain."

Kirk took a step toward him, then stopped. This was not the time to draw attention to Spock, not in front of the other bridge personnel. But they would have to confront one another and it was going to have to be soon. Spock was tearing himself apart, the guilt of what he had done on Vulcan more than he could control. And he himself was going to have to accept what had happened, to come to terms with what Spock had done. The Vulcan had meant to kill. It had come forcefully at the moment he had faced Spock that this was not the Spock he knew. He was facing an alien, an unknown being.

It had been so easy before to think of Spock as a man and judge him by human standards, to expect him to behave according to the human norm. But Spock had said it plainly himself: "I am not a man, I'm a Vulcan!" Kirk had not then understood the differences - he still didn't, but now he knew the differences were there and the knowledge was disturbing.

Spock's gaze had dropped from Kirk's face, seeming unable to face his Captain's scrutiny.

"There's got to be some way I can reach him," thought Kirk. "I just can't leave him like this!" He walked forward and touched the Vulcan's arm. "Spock..."

The dark eyes lifted and held his. Kirk put all his care and concern into his expression and was relieved to see Spock's eyes clear slightly. He did not dare let himself think that Spock might just be concealing his feelings to spare his Captain. "I shouldn't be long, but if we get to the rendezvous point before I get back, call me."

"Affirmative, sir."



The soft spray soothed the terrible irritation and the itching gradually faded. Kirk gave a long sigh of relief as a lovely sensation of nothingness spread across his chest.

"Bones, you're a genius!"

"Nope, just an old country doctor with a few tricks up my sleeve. Feel better now?"

"Um..."

McCoy grinned. "Well, you can sit up now, but don't put your shirt on for a few minutes. I'd like that stuff to dry. Actually, if you'd just go around bare-chested for a few days that thing would heal faster. 'Course it'd destroy discipline among some of the crew..."

"Cut it out, Bones," said Kirk laughingly. "Be serious..."

"I am, on both counts." His eyes narrowed as he watched Kirk get off the bed. "Jim, you didn't come down here just because of this - what's bothering you?" He watched as Kirk walked across the room and picked up his shirt.

Kirk didn't turn back, but stood looking at the shirt hanging from his hands. "Bones," he said quietly, "I've got a problem - a big one - and I don't know how to handle it..."

"Oh, boy," McCoy thought, "it's come to a head. Well, one of them had to give." Aloud he said, "Come on, let's go into my office."

McCoy put a glass of brandy in front of Kirk, poured one for himself, and sat across from the younger man. Kirk picked up his glass and watched its contents swirl around, reflecting the light as it moved. The silence lengthened.

"Well?"

Kirk looked up into the serious blue eyes, the concerned expression. He swallowed a mouthful of brandy and set the glass back down on the desk. "It's Spock." He looked down again. "I'm losing him, Bones. I'm losing him and I can't seem to do anything to stop it."

McCoy watched him carefully, making no comment. Kirk had to get all of this said without interruption.

"Going to Altair was probably the worst thing we could have done after what happened to us on Vulcan. Maybe if we had sat down, talked, perhaps we could have reconciled what happened. But all those ceremonies, functions, dignitaries - Bones, I didn't see him for three days, not to talk to, anyway..."

Kirk stopped and swallowed hard. McCoy reached over and filled his glass, and a brief smile of thanks touched Kirk's face. He picked up his glass again, then continued: "I've relived that afternoon so often in the past few days, and you know what stands out most in my mind? That it wasn't Spock standing there with a kirpa, murder shining out of his eyes - it was an alien. And that alien was looking at me, Bones, he was going to kill me..."

"Jim..."

Kirk did not seem to hear McCoy's interruption. "I thought I knew him - was so sure in my damned confidence that I could predict every action, every emotion that he denied I knew about. But I only truly knew one side of him - the honest, loyal, dependable friend... Sure, he was different from us, but not that much..." Kirk paused, then his worried eyes met McCoy's. "Bones, he is different. I don't know now what he is...how to deal with him..."

Kirk drained his glass again, then stood up and started pacing the room. "I've tried to talk to him since we came back aboard, to let him know that things aren't different than they were before..." He turned to McCoy, his hazel eyes bright with the myriad emotions that were seething in him. "...but things are different. I know it and Spock knows it. He almost killed his Captain - the man I thought was my best friend almost murdered me! Bones, how can you change that reality?"

McCoy's fingers drummed gently on the table as Kirk drew a deep breath and then sat down again. Sympathy darkened his blue eyes as he watched Kirk bury his head in his hands, not wanting to run away from the problem and having no idea what to do about it. As he sat there looking at the stricken man, he felt his anger rise. He had been fighting it ever since that moment on Vulcan when he realized that Spock really meant to kill Kirk. But Jim didn't need an additional burden now. He would never let the Captain know his true feelings.

McCoy still felt a bitter hatred toward the Vulcan. It was a human reaction; he did not try to rationalize it nor did he try to analyze it. He did not feel Kirk's desperate need to meet Spock halfway for, unlike Kirk, he had seen the whole thing.

Spock had killed Kirk, it was as simple as that. With a single-minded purpose, he had murdered the one man who had offered him friendship, who had accepted him as the outsider he was and attempted to help him find some peace with himself.

But McCoy wouldn't let his anger interfere with Kirk's plea for help. Kirk was important now, and important to McCoy in a way that Spock never would be. McCoy would bury his own feelings to help in any way he could. Kirk needed to hear encouragement, not damnation.

"Jim, the man you faced on Vulcan was an alien to you, to me, and to himself." He saw Kirk slowly look up at him and continued quietly, trying to reason things out to his own satisfaction as well as attempting to explain them to Kirk. "You told me that Spock said he wasn't a man, but a Vulcan. Jim, he isn't either; he's truly alien, with no belonging anywhere. A man is considered an alien outside his natural surroundings, his home, his environment."

Look at us - there are thousands of places where we are comfortable, where we would be accepted. Hell, I could go back to Georgia - you could even go back to Iowa..." He smiled at Kirk's grimace. "...I know you can't stand farming, but you'd be welcome there. There are very few sections of Starfleet that wouldn't take you with open arms - you have good friends from the Academy to the High Command.

"What has Spock got? We've got a crew of over four hundred. Who are his friends? You saw the way his contemporaries looked at him back on Vulcan - T'Pol, Stonn, T'Poling, even the guys who carried T'Pol's chair looked at him with contempt. He doesn't belong there Jim, he's a half-breed, a misfit. He's hated as much by those people as the half-breed Indian used to be hated by people on Earth three centuries ago!"

He finished his brandy and filled his glass again, pushing the bottle over to his Captain and waited until Kirk had done the same.

"He's talked very little about himself and his life, but there's no doubt it's been hell. I've studied him, Jim, as well as picked on him, and I've seen cracks in that iron control, moments when he's let himself relax. I've seen times when he could have killed, the emotion was so great, and I've seen times when he could have cried..." He leaned back in his chair. "And, Jim, in each case, you were the cause. Because of you, this man is very slowly allowing himself to live, not just exist, and that's a tremendous alteration. You allowed him to see the good side of what he was trying to deny he is - Human, too.

"I know absolutely nothing about Spock before I met him, except what all of us know. But I do know about the trauma of growing up - so do you. The only reason we ever get to the other side of adolescence is because someone, somewhere, is ready to put out a guiding hand and accept us as we are until we can accept ourselves. I doubt very much if Spock ever came to that understanding - after all, he's a Vulcan and can control his emotions, including self-doubt..."

"But he isn't just a Vulcan," interrupted Kirk, "he's half human. He's got to feel these emotions, even if he does control them!"

"Exactly - he's got all our doubts, fears, anxieties, as well as love, jealousy, hate - only he's not allowed to express them. Then along comes James T. Kirk. Cocky, sure - confident, well...he puts on a good show of it most of the time. But, most important, he possesses all those qualities that his First Officer feared - doubt, anxiety, jealousy, hate - and love. And you're not afraid to expose yourself, Jim. You aimed that love at a man who had been taught to be rigidly self-sufficient and you hit him hard, harder than you think."

"But I didn't treat him any differently than the others..."

"Sure you did - and you still do! Jim, you became everything necessary to bring Spock out of his shell: nursemaid, big brother, father, bully, guide... You didn't ask anything of him, but you made it impossible for him not to respond. You gave him your trust - what greater bond is there?"

McCoy was silent for a moment as he watched his words sink in. "Jim, he admitted you'd won just before we beamed down to Vulcan, remember? 'The male is usually accompanied by his closest friends...' I'll bet that word hadn't passed his lips very often. Maybe never. And in front of T'Pol he said it again: 'Not outworlders, friends.' He literally threw his heritage in her face, practically said he was half-human and that he had accepted it - after he had fought so long and so hard to deny that he was anything but Vulcan.

"You had offered friendship, had tried hard to understand and accept what you couldn't really understand, and, for probably the first time in Spock's life, he went against all of his training and reached out."

McCoy fiddled with his glass as Kirk's eyes bored into him. "Jim, your world is still secure, nothing's changed that. His world's shattered. He stood up in front of all Vulcan and said that a Human was his friend, and it turned out that his friendship with you was more important to him than his marriage, than the Vulcan tradition that had enslaved him all his life! Then, due to a temporary insanity brought on by a chemical imbalance, he almost killed you. That's not restricted only to alien races - haven't you found yourself momentarily shaken by the sudden realization that you could have killed if the situation had allowed it?"

The look on Kirk's face told McCoy that Kirk was following his reasoning with no difficulty and his eyes admitted to the truth of that last statement.

"You can understand and accept it - he can't. Spock's background is vastly different from ours, but his human nature is the same. And Vulcans have the same emotions. That double suppression is a burden that none of us will ever be able to understand.

"By himself, he'll never get over what happened on Vulcan - just as that by himself he would never have reached out for your friendship. He will survive this, he will continue to function efficiently and logically, but he won't be the Spock you knew before. You didn't meet something unknown on Vulcan; he did nothing that any of us are not capable of if we let our dark sides get out of control. But he met something unknown - he met a loss of control, and that is something he was never taught to deal with."

McCoy stood up and moved around the desk, resting his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Let him understand he's no different, Jim. Let him know he did something that any man is capable of. Try to get him to understand that he is a man as well as a Vulcan, and try to get him to accept it. You will never forget what happened, neither will he, nor should either of you. But if he will face it and understand why he did it, and face the reality of his feelings for you because of it, he will admit to the necessity of the understanding that you share and the trust that it brings..."

The intercom whistled, breaking the mood and jolting them both back to reality. "McCoy here."

"Spock here, Doctor. Is Captain Kirk there?"

"Yes, I am, Mr. Spock."

"We are five minutes away from rendezvous with the *Lexington*, sir. Ambassador Tarwan is preparing to depart."

"Thank you. I'll meet you in the transporter room. Kirk out." He stood and looked at McCoy. "Thanks, Bones, and not just for the brandy."

"You're welcome, Captain." He watched as Kirk started for the door. Just before Kirk walked out, McCoy said, "Jim, I think if you're going to play diplomat in front of Ambassador Tarwan, you'd better put your shirt back on." He held out the shirt Kirk had left on his desk. "I know you rarely obey any order I give you, but somehow I think now would be a good time to start!"

Kirk's laughter echoed in his ears as the doors slid shut behind him. McCoy's smile slowly faded. Kirk had a rough time ahead of him and there was no one who could help him. He hoped for everyone concerned that it worked out. He had tried to impress on Kirk how much Spock needed his understanding - he had not mentioned how much Kirk needed Spock's in return. Nor had he mentioned that he himself did not really understand all the implications, or that he would never fully forgive Spock for what he had done. Spock had killed his Captain and his friend - McCoy's, too. He knew that the anger he felt would die, but he would never forgive. But for him it was not necessary. Spock's existence did not depend on him; it did depend on Kirk. And McCoy knew that Kirk had the strength - and the love - to give what was necessary to heal the terrible breach. He, McCoy, was not the one, and never would be.



Kirk lay restlessly on the bed, afraid to allow sleep to come. Each time he dozed off, his mind filled with images of Spock and Vulcan. T'Pol's command of fighting to the death, and the sick dread in the pit of his stomach as he saw Spock coming at him with the *lirpa*. He finally gave it up as a lost cause and got up. Maybe a walk through the ship would relax him. He didn't want to go to McCoy again, to admit that he couldn't sleep and hadn't been able to do so with any real success since Vulcan.

The *Enterprise* was quiet, the third shift working almost silently at their stations. He came and went almost unnoticed, a dark shadow in the doorway, occasionally exchanging a quiet word with someone who did notice him.

The observation deck was in deep gloom, but not so dark as to completely obscure the figure standing and staring at the stars. The dim light showed only the slender profile; the Vulcan's expression was hidden in the deeper shadows. But even the dim light was unable to hide the tension of muscles and the almost unbearable pressure Spock was enduring. He turned slightly as he heard the doors open. "Captain..."

"Spock..."

Kirk stopped just within the doorway, remembering the last time they had stood here together. It seemed years ago now. Leila Kalomi had departed along with the other Omicron Ceti settlers and Starbase 27 was fast fading into the blackness of space. She had told him what Spock had said, 'I have a responsibility to this ship - to that man on the bridge...' It had warmed him then, to know that Spock felt his place was on the *Enterprise* with his Captain. Edith Keeler had brought their position home without realizing it. 'Where do you estimate we belong, Miss Keeler?' 'You - at his side, as if you've always been there and always will...'

Now he was facing a stranger. Every defense Spock possessed was fully in place, no opening, no small smile, nothing that offered a welcome. He found himself taking a step backward, confused, ambivalent about his friend whom he now feared. "Uh, I was just checking up on things..." His voice faltered; he knew Spock didn't believe him.

"Indeed, Captain." A polite, non-committal remark. No question, no pushing, but then Spock would do neither. If there was to be any breakthrough, it would have to come from Kirk alone.

"Yes, well...uh, goodnight, Spock."

He almost ran, hating himself, but totally unable to control his reaction. At the end of the corridor, he stopped and turned back to look at the observation deck. Spock had not followed him, and the door had been swallowed up by the gloom.

He turned and started walking again. He had to stop acting like this. One way or another, he and Spock had to

resolve this - it was going to affect the necessary teamwork on the bridge and lives were going to be put unnecessarily in danger. But how could it be resolved?

He found himself outside Engineering. He knew little would be going on, but thought he would look in anyway. He often found the huge engines soothing and, heaven knew, he had to find some way of calming his seething nerves. He quietly entered and almost fell over Scotty, who was lying half inside an open panel just inside the door. He bent down and tugged at a heel. A muttering reached him and, judging by the thickness of the burr, Scotty was pretty worked up about something. Kirk tugged on the foot again and this time Scotty came exploding out of the shaft.

"Ach, canna ye nae let a mon do..." His voice died away as he came face to face with Kirk's raised eyebrows and amused expression. He started to blurt out an apology, but Kirk interrupted.

"Problem, Scotty?"

"Well, sir, yes and no."

"Come on, Scotty, it's six hours after you're officially off duty and I find you head-first inside an engine. I admit it's not the last place I'd look for you, but not usually at this time of night. What's up?"

"Ensign Thomas mixed up the coolant with the waste matter, sir. It's a devil of a mess in there. I've been working for an hour or so, but I can't do anything with it. I think we'll have to flush out the engines..."

A strange expression crossed Kirk's face and Scotty felt that Thomas was going to be in for some trouble. "We'll have to go to a repair base for that, won't we?"

"Aye, sir, that we will."

"You're sure about this mix-up, Scotty? There's nothing you can do?"

"I'll keep trying, sir, but I think it's too far gone for anything I can do here in space."

"Very good," Kirk said absently, seeming to have forgotten Thomas after all. "Carry on, Mr. Scott." He left Scott staring at the closed door, wondering if the Captain had gone baley.

The idea that had struck him in Engineering was becoming clearer in his mind as he reached his cabin. He was deep in thought as he entered and didn't immediately notice that there was someone sitting at the desk. He pulled his shirt off and threw it on the bed, then came back into the other room. It was then that he noticed McCoy. "Changed quarters, Doctor?" he asked, a slight tinge of irony in his voice.

"And I might ask if you've changed your duty to third shift, Jim. You've been gone a long time. Your own shift starts in three hours - that doesn't allow for very much sleep for a commanding officer."

Kirk acknowledged McCoy's statement with a grunt and dropped into the unoccupied chair.

"I've been to Spock's quarters too, Jim. Empty - same as here. Do you happen to know where he is?"

"Worried about him?"

"Some. Not that there's anything I can do for that tight-lipped sack-clothed Vulcan, but I like to know where to expect the casualties to be coming from."

"Observation deck."

"Thanks. Jim, have you been getting any sleep at all?"

"Not much," Kirk admitted. "I'm not enjoying the dreams that come with it, Bones," he said. "What would it take for you to order Spock on sick leave?"

"Depends. Why?"

"What about me?"

"Jim, what's this all about? You're both wrought up and I know you haven't been sleeping. Heaven only knows about Spock; I haven't even seen him since we left Altair. You've got an idea about something and I'm not too sure I'm going to like it. Are you going to tell so I'll be sure I don't?"

"Bones, Scotty just told me we've got a problem with the engines. No, don't look at me like that, this is purely accidental. But we'll have to go to a repair base. That means the possibility of shore leave..." He leaned back in his chair, his arms covering but not completely concealing the angry red welt that crossed his chest. "...I want to get off the *Enterprise* and I want to take Spock with me. We've got a problem and we've got to hatch it out. And I think we've got to get to the bottom of the whole thing by ourselves, with no one around to interfere..."

"Jim, I don't like it. I'm not sure it's a good thing for you to be alone with Spock just now."

"Why not, Bones?"

McCoy knew he was trapped. He was going to be forced to say something he didn't want to, something that would make Kirk's decision even harder than it already was.

"I'm not too sure how to say it. I don't trust Spock, Jim. He's been through mental hell - physically he's returning to normal, but I'd hate to push him in the state he's in. There's no predicting how he'd react in a confrontation with you just now. Remember, he's a Vulcan..."

"And you told me yourself a little while ago he wasn't just a Vulcan...he's my friend too, Doctor!" Kirk

snapped, his eyes blazing. "I saw him just now - he was alone and he was in torment. And do you know what I did? I ran away from him. I hurt him so badly. I looked at him and I knew he could read my fear. I destroyed any hope he might have had that what happened on Vulcan hadn't changed completely what we had. I looked into his eyes and saw despair..."

He smashed his fist on the desk. "Bones, I've got to face him with nowhere to run. I've got to reach him and find myself. I can't do that here, there are too many easy outs..."

McCoy nodded, seeing in Kirk's fragile determination that it would be better to let them go and trust that the extraordinary bond they had shared would see them through to the understanding that would have to come - or the resulting destruction if they failed.



The intercom rang, bringing Kirk groggily out of a restless doze. He glanced at the chronometer - he had slept for just over an hour. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rested his head in his hands. He felt awful, his head was pounding and his chest was more irritated than ever. Bleary-eyed, he headed for the bathroom.

Spock wasn't at breakfast. Kirk got a cup of black coffee and went to join McCoy, who was happily attacking a full plate of ham and eggs, accompanied by the ever-present grits. One look told McCoy that Kirk was feeling no better than he had been a few hours earlier.

"You'll never grow hair on your chest with black coffee, Jim-boy. Why don't you try some food like the rest of the human race? You might find you like it..." He broke off, seeing that his attempt at humor was going very wide of the mark. "Jim, you've got to eat..."

"I'm not very hungry, Bones. Have you seen Spock?"

"No. He's probably meditating or some fool thing in his quarters. He'll show up for his duty shift."

"Yeah, I suppose so..." Kirk saw Scotty come in and get some coffee and he motioned for the Engineer to join them. McCoy noted with some concern that Scotty also seemed to be existing on black coffee. How the blazes was he going to keep the crew going if he couldn't get anyone to eat?

"Scotty," he said, "you look like the devil. When did you last go to bed?"

Scotty frowned. "I was trying to fix the engines, Doctor, no time for sleep last night. Captain," he said, turning toward Kirk, "it's no good. I've tried everything I can think of to flush that muck out and nothing works. We'll have to go to a repair base."

"All right, Scotty. I'll contact Starfleet. Repair Base 7 isn't far from here. We should be able to get priority treatment there - Simon Alles is a good friend, he'll look after us." He took a long, searching look at his Chief Engineer. "Any pressing work that needs your attention at the moment?"

Scotty looked puzzled. "No, sir, just need to keep an eye on the coolant level and hope you don't need more than warp one speed."

"Good, then I'm ordering you off duty, Mr. Scott. Get some sleep. You've done as much as you can and I don't want you falling apart. Agreed, Doctor?"

McCoy had been watching the exchange with a slight smile playing on his face as he saw the trap that Kirk was laying and how neatly Scotty fell into it. Scotty saw that he was outnumbered and wearily agreed to go to bed as soon as he checked out the engine room and left the appropriate orders. He finished the rest of his coffee and left.

"Jim, I don't suppose I could convince you to follow those orders yourself?" McCoy said hopefully, looking at the tired man sitting across from him.

"No time, Bones. I've got things to do." He stood up, picking up his empty cup. "Oh, I want you to call Spock to Sickbay in about an hour and I'd like to be there, too. I want you to order that leave, Bones, for both of us. I want it officially logged so there can be no backing out."

Spock was already on the bridge when Kirk arrived and he noted that the Vulcan did not look up as he normally did at the Captain's arrival. He had a quiet word with the rest of the crew, then moved over to Spock's computer station. The Vulcan straightened as he heard Kirk approach, but his eyes did not meet the Captain's. Kirk tried to ignore the tension and explained the situation and the plans for going to the repair base.

Spock finally looked up at Kirk, his eyes completely devoid of any expression. "I agree with Mr. Scott, Captain. It seems the only logical solution to the problem."

Kirk nodded, his eyes lingering on Spock's face as he tried to figure out what the Vulcan was thinking; then he gave up and turned to Lt. Uhura, ordering her to contact Starfleet and explain the situation. Moving to his command chair, he ordered Chekov to plot a course for Repair Base 7. "Keep her at warp one, Mr. Sulu. If for any reason you need to change speed, don't do it without first consulting me. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

Kirk glanced around the bridge, at a momentary loss of what to do next. Mercifully, the intercom rang. "McCoy to bridge. Captain, if you and Mr. Spock are free, I'd like to see you both in my office."

"We'll be there directly, Doctor," Kirk said, not looking at his First Officer. "Kirk out."



The doors of Sickbay closed behind them before Kirk spoke. He had sat in McCoy's office watching Spock as the Doctor ordered sick leave and explained why. Spock had not said a word, had only stared at his hands as McCoy spoke. His only reaction came when McCoy ordered sick leave for Kirk as well. Spock's head had snapped up and for a moment, Kirk was sure he saw fear in the Vulcan's eyes, but it came and went so fast that he couldn't be sure. Now he was going to force the issue; he wasn't going to allow himself to run any further. "Come to my quarters, Spock."

"Captain, my duties..."

"That's an order, Mister!"

Spock retreated behind his mask and followed Kirk to the turbolift and then to his quarters. He remained standing at attention while Kirk sat at his desk, his gaze focused squarely on some point above Kirk's head. Kirk sat looking at him for a few minutes, but Spock did not change his position.

Finally Kirk gave up. "Mr. Spock, I have arranged for a two-man shuttle when we reach the repair base. I think the time has come for some honest thinking and talking and we can't do it on the *Enterprise*..."

"Captain, I don't..."

"I haven't finished!" Kirk tried to ignore the mute appeal in Spock's eyes. He had to get this out now, uninterrupted, or it would never get said. "The *Enterprise* has functioned as the best starship in the Fleet for more than a year, Spock, partly because of something that you and I shared. Whatever it was, understanding, trust, whatever label you want to put on it, is gone, it got lost back on Vulcan. Spock..." His voice grew slightly unsteady and his eyes filled with a pain the Vulcan had rarely seen. "...I don't know what to do - I'm lost, too. I need your help..."

Spock struggled for control, all the helpless guilt and horror threatening to break the fragile balance he had been desperately clinging to. "Captain, I can't help you..." His head dropped and he blindly reached out for the chair in front of him. "...I can't even help myself!"

Kirk stared at the trembling man in front of him, a desperate hope starting to build. Spock had admitted his weakness, a glimpse of the lonely, searching man had been revealed. Maybe if they could get away they could cope, find each other again, or at least reconcile themselves to the trauma of Vulcan. He got up and moved to the Vulcan; not daring to touch him. "Spock," he said gently, "let's try - we've got to reach out now or we'll never do it."

Spock lifted his face, his momentary openness gone, barriers reinstated, the blank features once more underlining the alien part of his nature. The friend Kirk knew was gone - only the stranger remained. "It won't work, Captain. As long as you live, you will remember that I tried to kill you, and would have, had not Dr. McCoy intervened. And it might happen again. I lost control once; there could be other times. You will always know that. You'll look at me and remember and wonder when it might happen again. How could I ask that you trust me? I can no longer trust myself! Is that what mutual understanding and respect is built upon? Is that the kind of man you want for your First Officer and your friend?"

Kirk's eyes didn't leave Spock's face while the Vulcan spoke. Spock could see the truth of his words hitting home, but for the first time since they had left Vulcan, Kirk didn't shrink from the icy distance in Spock's eyes.

Kirk's voice was soft when he answered, but the determination was evident. "Don't you think that's my problem, Commander, to be dealt with by me, in my own way? You've got enough problems of your own; I'd suggest you start thinking about them!"

Spock's eyes conceded the point.

"We'll arrive in less than an hour at the repair base. The shuttlecraft will be waiting. I'm leaving Scotty in command here; he knows more about the repair work than I do anyway. We'll have two days, Mr. Spock, two days to make one of the most important decisions of our lives or lose..." His voice trailed off.

Their eyes met and the dominant expression in each was fear.



McCoy sat in Kirk's quarters and watched him pack, acutely conscious of the growing tension in the man. The Captain was traveling light - trousers, boots, shirt, sweater, jacket, bathing suit. When Kirk was ready to close his suitcase, McCoy handed him a small jar. Kirk looked at him with raised brows.

"For your chest if it gets too bad. I'd like you to take my advice and try to keep any material off it. The more exposure that can get to air and sun, the faster it'll heal. It's in a nasty place, especially with the muscles torn like they are. Of course, you could always stop breathing for a day or so to keep it still..."

The two of them grinned at one another, then Kirk tucked the jar into the corner of his case and locked it. "Well, guess that's it. You coming to see us off?"

"Of course! What's the point of going on a vacation without having somebody around to wave good-bye?" He hesitated a moment, then added, "You're sure Spock's going to go with you?"

"Bones, I'm not sure of anything but that he's just as scared as I am...I think he'll come. I guess I sort of ordered him to, instead of asking. He was being bullheaded about the whole thing."

McCoy frowned. "Well, I'm not going to offer any advice - you understand him better than I do. But, Jim, don't expect too much. He opened himself to you once and it hurt him more than we can possibly conceive to have almost killed you. It might have done damage so deep that he'll never trust himself again."

A familiar, stubborn determination crossed Kirk's face and McCoy knew the Captain wasn't going to accept defeat, from either Spock or himself. He was leaving himself wide open for a greater hurt than he had already received. "But that's why he's the commander he is," thought McCoy. "I only hope it doesn't shatter him."

Spock was waiting in the transporter room, a small case on the floor beside him. He was dressed entirely in black, which underlined the tint of green in his skin and made his eyes look like black coals glowing from under the upswept brows. He acknowledged the Captain's greeting with more formality than usual, but he did not seem as tense as Kirk. McCoy found his hopes rising a little. Maybe if this man would just give a little, a miracle could happen and they could accept each other - and themselves.

Kirk and Spock positioned themselves on the transporter platform as they had so many times in the past, only this time a yawning chasm separated them, their air of desperation hitting McCoy almost like a tempest of emotion.



The small craft flew low over the wooded area. Where the trees broke, there were glimpses of small lakes sparkling in the sunlight. No words passed between the occupants of the shuttle. Kirk was busy following the instruments as he flew the craft to their destination. Spock, out of long habit, followed the descent on his computer, his mind aware of all of Kirk's movements, noting the craft's reactions to the delicate changes of altitude and speed. Within a few minutes, they had landed in a small clearing. Kirk stretched out his arms. "Well, we're here."

Spock's eyebrow rose slightly. He was still amused by the human tendency to always state the obvious.

Kirk smiled in return, then got up and opened the door. A cool breeze was coming off the water. He jumped down and looked around. The cabin Allen had described was right where it should be, and only a few meters in front of it was a long dock with a boat tied to it. A man could be quite content here with very little effort.

Spock landed lightly beside him, then reached back and brought out their suitcases and a large box full of provisions. Kirk took the suitcases and led the way into the cabin, holding the door open for the Vulcan.

The cabin was bigger than it looked from outside. There was a small kitchen off to one side and the bedroom was in a loft above the main living area. The living room was a sunken area in front of a large stone fireplace. An ample supply of wood was piled in an iron container to one side of the fireplace. There was little furniture, just large pillows and fur rugs scattered in front of the hearth and a small table with a couple of chairs near the kitchen.

Spock started unpacking the box while Kirk carried their suitcases up the stairs. One side of the loft was totally glassed in, giving a panoramic view of the lake and surrounding area. Kirk bounced on both beds and decided that Spock would like the harder one, so he put the Vulcan's case on it. Looking out the window, he decided he would swim before dinner, even if it was too cold. The water was too inviting to resist.

A devilish thought crossed his mind and he called downstairs. "Spock, want to go for a swim?" He knew before he asked what the answer would be and was already resigned to a solitary session before the Vulcan answered. The refusal was polite, but firm.

He pulled on his trunks and grabbed a towel from the adjoining bathroom, then galloped down the stairs two at a time. As Spock turned from his unpacking, Kirk saw a cold expression replace the one of quiet amusement at Kirk's enthusiasm. The Vulcan's eyes were like ice and Kirk felt a twinge of dread pull at his stomach. What could be wrong?

Then he realized what Spock was staring at - the vivid red scar that ran the full length of his chest.

"Damn," he thought. "Of all the careless, stupid things to do..." He swung the towel around his shoulders carelessly, covering his chest. He grinned at Spock. "I nominate you as chief cook - I'll be the bottle washer. I'll be back in half an hour and expect to see a feast!" Not waiting for Spock to answer, he disappeared out the door.

He drowned his anger and frustration in the cold waters of the lake. He dove off the end of the dock and swam as hard and as strongly as he could, intentionally tiring himself out, getting rid of as much pent-up emotion as he

could. He deliberately tried to think of nothing, just let himself become lost in the feeling of the cold water washing over his body as his strong strokes pulled him firmly across the lake.

He finally felt himself start to tire and turned over onto his back, looking toward the shore. Spock was standing there watching him, motionless. Although Kirk was a good way from shore, he was struck by the strange expression on Spock's face. Kirk stared back, trying to figure out what the Vulcan was thinking about, but the expression was one he'd not seen before.

He started to swim back and immediately discovered that he had strained his injured chest. Torn muscles screaming, his arms rebelled and he was having trouble staying afloat. He thought he was covering up his difficulty fairly well, until he saw Spock dive into the lake and with his powerful arms strike through the water to his side in only a few minutes. A strong arm slipped around Kirk's chest and in silence he towed Kirk back to the shore. He helped him onto the dock and they sat side by side for a moment, each breathing heavily, Kirk from the sudden realization of the danger he had been in, Spock from the exertion of pulling Kirk back to shore.

Finally Kirk looked at the Vulcan. "Spock..."

Spock got to his feet. "You were late for dinner, Captain; I was becoming concerned."

'Captain.' The formality was still there. He could save a life, but he couldn't acknowledge a friend. Damn! How was he going to break through?

Kirk slowly trailed Spock back to the cabin. The smells as he entered said plainly that dinner really was ready. Spock was coming down the stairs, a dry towel in his hands, along with Kirk's clothes. He had already changed his own wet clothes. He silently handed Kirk's to him.

Kirk took them and turned away. A quiet voice stopped him. "I think that Dr. McCoy would want you to use this, Captain." Spock held the jar that McCoy had given Kirk in his quarters. Kirk stared mutely at the jar, then up at Spock.

"It's not that bad, Spock."

The flicker in the Vulcan's eyes told Kirk that he had not lied very well. Spock took him by the arm and propelled him to a chair by the fireplace. Steeling himself to see the livid wound, he carefully dried Kirk's body and then applied the cream. Kirk gratefully closed his eyes as the Vulcan gently rubbed the soothing heat into the injured muscles. He missed the flood of pain and guilt that crossed Spock's face as the sensitive fingers felt the damage that was still present. It would be a while before this physical reminder of what had happened healed from this man's body. And as long as it was present, it would be one more block in healing the breach between them.



Kirk finished putting away the last of the dishes and dried his hands on the towel that was hanging on the rack. He shrugged into his sweater and walked down into the living room, where Spock was putting the finishing touches to the fire. Kirk appreciated the heat - he was too accustomed to the controlled climate on the *Enterprise* to like the rather penetrating cold of the unheated building. He saw a slight tremor pass through the Vulcan and realized that Spock must be feeling the cold far more than he was. He pulled some of the large pillows closer to the fire and flopped down, ignoring a twinge of pain as his chest twisted with the movement of the pillows. Spock brought over some coffee, leaving his tea brewing on the stove, then he went back and poured himself a cup. Making a detour to the bedroom for an extra sweater, he came and sat cross-legged on a pile of fur rugs on the far side of the fireplace.

They sat in silence, each watching the dancing flames, and lost in his own thoughts. But the silence wasn't awkward and at least that was a start. Kirk found himself watching the Vulcan, trying to figure out what was going on in that complicated brain.

Then came a quiet word, so quiet that Kirk wasn't altogether sure he heard it. "Red..."

He looked at the fire - it was red, sort of. What did Spock mean? He looked back at Spock and was startled to see the Vulcan staring directly at him. "Everything was red - the sky, the blood, my mind...all red, burning, driving..."

Kirk could feel his heart start banging - Spock's eyes weren't focused, although they were staring at him. His throat felt dry. He swallowed hard so he wouldn't be betrayed by a cracking voice. "Spock, that's finished. Don't torture yourself..."

"Kali-fee...choose - your bondmate or your friend. Admit now, which is more important. You must kill the one you love..."

Kirk froze. Why was Spock talking like this? Please, Bones, don't be right. You said you didn't trust him, that I shouldn't force a confrontation, that he wasn't strong enough yet...

Spock sighed and picked up his cup. "More coffee, Captain?" He stopped, his attention focused on the strange look on Kirk's face. "What is wrong?" Concern rang strongly in Spock's voice; he seemed unaware that he had spoken

before.

Kirk forced himself to smile. "Nothing, I'm just so tired, Spock. I know we've got a lot to talk about, but I've got to go to bed. Tomorrow..."

Spock still looked puzzled, but nodded agreement. Kirk slowly went upstairs and undressed, crawling thankfully between the warm blankets. He couldn't talk to Spock now, not with the Vulcan's words ringing in his ears. He needed time to think and he was too exhausted now to try. His last waking vision was of the Vulcan sitting motionless in front of the fire.



Someone was moving, standing above him. He was lying naked on the bed with nothing covering him. He shot up to discover Spock standing there with all the blankets in his hands. "What the hell are you doing?" His voice sounded panicky, even to him.

Spock looked flustered. "I was coming to bed, Captain. You were moving restlessly and had thrown your blankets on the floor. I was endeavoring to replace them before the cold awakened you."

Kirk flushed, embarrassed and angry at exposing his fear. Spock looked honestly surprised by his reaction and was beginning to look as uncomfortable as Kirk felt. "I'm sorry, Spock. I guess I was having a bad dream. You fitted in quite nicely."

Spock looked even more uncomfortable. "That's understandable, sir." He looked at the blankets in his hand and mutely offered them to Kirk, who took them sheepishly.

"This is ridiculous!"

"Sir?"

Kirk looked up. "Spock, you scared me just now, badly. You scared me earlier this evening muttering about Vulcan and blood and bondmates..."

Spock looked uneasy. "It won't happen again, Captain, and despite what Dr. McCoy has said, I have recovered physically from the pon farr and I am regaining control of my mind. I will do nothing irrational - you need not be frightened."

"That's what I thought before..." The words were out before Kirk realized it.

Dark eyes met his head on. "I am not what you thought I was before. I am a Vulcan - it cannot be explained, only experienced. Eons of bloody savagery have made me what I am. I must never forget it, and now that you have seen it, you will never forget it either."

"That's what I'm afraid of," thought Kirk to himself. "And if that's true, I've lost the most valuable friend I've ever had..."



The night passed slowly. Spock did not attempt to remain in the loft, but returned to his vigil by the fire, leaving Kirk alone. He remained sitting motionless by the flickering light, his eyes closed. From where he was, Kirk could not tell if the Vulcan was sleeping, though he doubted it. It was a week ago that he had faced Spock on the sands of Vulcan; probably the onset of pon farr came at least a week before that. Spock had once insisted that Vulcans didn't need rest, that under stress they could go for weeks without sleep. There was no doubt that Spock was under stress.

Kirk shifted uncomfortably. His chest felt worse than ever. He had been a fool to strain it by swimming so vigorously. It was his own stupid fault and he deserved the consequences. After considerable tossing about, he decided that he might as well give up trying to sleep. The sky was starting to lighten - maybe if he took a long walk he could think of some way out of this dilemma.

He dressed slowly, being careful to use McCoy's cream unobtrusively, so Spock would not be aware of his discomfort. He put a jacket over his sweater and moved quietly down the stairs. Spock gave no indication of noticing that he was there, although Kirk was sure he knew. He opened the door and stepped out into the frosty morning.

Looking around, he saw a path disappearing into the woods around the side of the boat house. The dawn light gave everything an unreal appearance, with frost clinging to the trees and grass. He turned up the collar of his jacket and plunged his hands deep into the pockets. Taking a last look at the cabin, he headed off.

After only a few minutes, he found himself relaxing, the brisk air clearing his head and making him feel more alive. The birds were starting to twitter and morning activity was beginning all around him.

He thought of the last time he had walked through the woods on a frosty morning. It had been some years ago and with a man whom he loved deeply - his father. Suddenly the image of his father was clear in his mind, as real as if the man was standing beside him, tall, rugged, and with a love and an understanding of people that his son had never found in another person.

Kirk had been home on leave - it was shortly before the final illness that had claimed his father's life. They were walking through the small woods on the family farm. It was late in the fall; all the crops were in. The ducks and geese were on the move, the air was crisp and clear, with the sounds of migrating birds loud in their ears.

He had always been able to discuss any problems with his father. They had had a unique understanding of each other which made words almost unnecessary, but his father's insight always made the problem seem so much easier to solve.

As he pictured that scene, Kirk found his eyes filling with tears. If only he could run home and bury his face in his father's chest, everything would be all right. If only he could give this problem to someone else - have it solved for him.

But that could never happen. He was no longer a boy. He was thirty-three, a starship commander. Other people ran to him; their problems were his problems. He had no one to run to. His father was no longer there - he was alone. He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He was alone - he would have to face it and accept it.

Suddenly it dawned on him - alone! He stood in the glowing sunrise with his eyes fixed straight ahead, seeing not the beauty of his surroundings, but the figure of a lonely man standing at a computer station, picking up a meal tray, standing lost and solitary on shore, watching his shipmates go their separate ways, the attempts to hide the hurt when bigotry, open and deadly, was aimed his way. Every abuse, every slight, every degradation was accepted. There was no rebuttal, no defense, just a tightening of the barriers. But the dark eyes didn't hide everything.

They didn't hide worry, fear, amusement, pain, frustration - those emotions were present and in full play. But no one ever saw them. 'Stoneface' was the crew's name for Spock. But that was the last thing he was. Why did he, Kirk, see what the others missed? Even McCoy didn't always see. With very few exceptions, Kirk always knew exactly what Spock was thinking and feeling. What was it in the Vulcan that made this empathy possible?

He was alone. As Kirk was alone.

They had reached out to each other and, for a brief moment in time, they were no longer alone. Kirk suddenly realized how it would be without Spock at his side. He needed the Vulcan. He needed his strength and support. He needed Spock's friendship, as much as Spock needed his. They were special, each to the other. There was nowhere else to turn - for either of them.

Kirk turned and raced back to the cabin, suddenly clutched by a desperate fear that he had already lost Spock, that the Vulcan would be gone. He burst in through the door, half stumbling as the searing pain caused by his heaving chest momentarily doubled him over. He drew in a gasping breath.

"Spock! Spock! Where are you?"

The Vulcan looked up in astonishment at Kirk's entrance. He had been fixing breakfast, but dropped the frying pan onto the floor and quickly moved over to where Kirk was leaning against the wall. Kirk grabbed onto him like a drowning man.

"Spock, I thought you were gone. I was so scared...I thought I was alone."

"Jim, calm down. It's all right - I'm here."

The use of his name, the concern shining from Spock's eyes had Kirk half sobbing as Spock led him over to the blazing fire. His confused emotions and tension, along with the pain in his chest was making it difficult to breathe. Spock got him sitting on the rug, but when he tried to move away, Kirk gripped his arms more fiercely. "Spock, don't leave. Please, just sit here for a minute. I really haven't lost my mind. I've got to talk to you and it's got to be now. Please, just sit."

Spock looked a bit dubious, but sat down, edging a little away from the human. Kirk let him go, realizing that Spock's attitude hadn't changed, that he did not feel right now the desperate need that had sent Kirk flying back to the cabin. He fought to control his breathing so he could make himself coherent. Spock sat silently, watching him.

Gradually Kirk's breathing returned to normal, his mind stopped whirling in a kaleidoscope of confused color. He forced himself to look Spock straight in the face, and the open appeal stopped Spock from dropping his eyes. They sat facing each other for the first time since that day on Vulcan, when the lirpas had weighed heavily in their hands.

"Spock," Kirk said softly, "we all make mistakes and I've allowed myself to make an almost fatal error by letting the trauma of what happened on Vulcan blind me to reality."

"I was scared, and because I was scared, I didn't stop to think. I didn't stop to realize that the Spock I faced on Vulcan was not the Spock I knew, was not the Spock you know. The Spock I know is sitting here in front of me and I'd trust him with my life - anyplace, anytime..."

"We go through our lives making mistakes, and we need someone to turn to when we make them; we need someone in

our lives who may not completely understand us or why we do things, but who is there, not to pass judgement, but to accept - and forgive, if necessary.

"Loss of trust takes that person away, Spock. It leaves a man vulnerable and alone. But if a man is that alone, he can't function. A human cannot deal with life without somebody to share it. I don't mean to share the responsibility or the guilt, those things stay with the man alone - but to share a life and to help that man hold onto a life.

"When I was walking this morning, I needed that person, and when I turned, he wasn't there. I was helpless - alone. I had turned away from the one man in the universe who has any chance of understanding who I am and what I am going through. There was no one beside me, Spock. You weren't there..."

"Jim, I..."

"No, don't say anything yet. Let me get this out. From the first day I met you, you almost made it a point to underline our differences. I ignored those warnings. As I got to know you better, the differences didn't seem to matter any more. I thought I understood why you acted as you did, and I trusted you. And even though I knew you had some difficulties, I thought you accepted me and felt that same trust.

"Spock, I'll never forget what happened on Vulcan. Sure, there'll be times when I'll find myself backing off, times when I can't possibly understand why you are acting in a way that is different from us - but you'll have the same problems with me. Spock, it's because of who and what you are that you're so very important to me and to my life..."

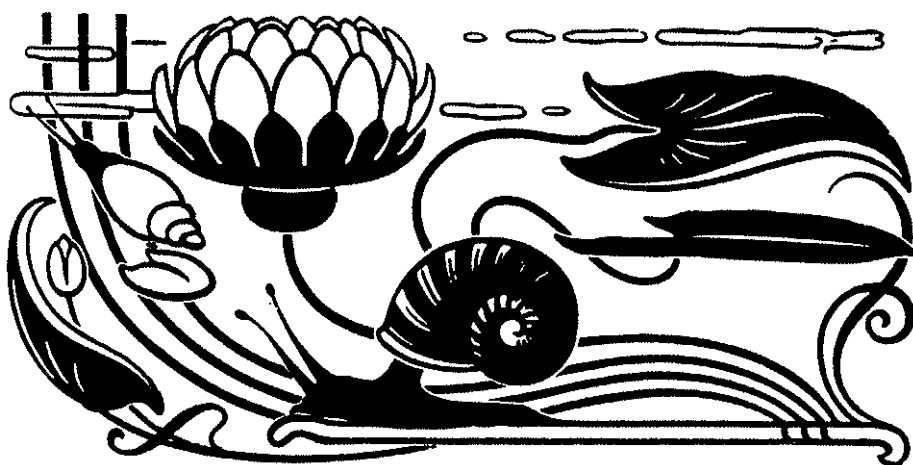
Kirk stopped, his hazel eyes filling with desperate tears as he tried to put into words the terrible aching in his heart. "I've only said this to one other man in my life, but I said it too late and my father never heard it. I'm not going to make that same mistake twice..."

He got painfully to his feet, the Vulcan silently rising with him, his dark eyes guarded. They stood facing each other, then Kirk continued in a quiet voice that echoed throughout the room:

"Spock, I love you."

Who moved first was never clear in their minds, but suddenly they stood in a tight embrace, Spock's dark head buried in Kirk's shoulder his silent answer to his friend's commitment. Kirk hung on for all he was worth, not thinking, not daring to hope that their troubles were behind them. What had happened would always remain a vivid memory, an uneasy knowledge that what had happened once could happen again. But for now, they were together. Kirk had reached out when Spock could not. Spock had received the forgiveness he could never have asked for. For now, the breach was healed. They would go on as before, one becoming even more an extension of the other, becoming ever more important in the life of the other, becoming more loved in the sight of the other.

For now, they were one.





It was all Sayant and Sarek could do to hold the thrashing body on the bed. Sayant tried a mald, but he couldn't break through the blinding pain of Spock's thoughts. Spock cried out again and again, pleading for Kirk to stop, calling of the danger ahead. Sayant tried to get him to wake up, but Spock was too far away and oblivious to the attempt.



They weren't going to make it. The storm caught the small craft and threw it at its will. Kirk grimly hung on and used every ounce of his considerable skill, but he was fighting a losing battle. McCoy sat silently beside him, praying to a God he thought he had forgotten. Somehow Kirk kept enough control to prevent them from breaking apart in the atmosphere, but he could do nothing to initiate a soft landing. Briefly he thought it would be a more merciful death to break up in the atmosphere than to be smashed in the solid impact when they hit the planet surface, but his survival instinct was too strong. He watched as the planet surface sped ever closer.

"Hang on, Bones, this is it!"

The impact tore the vessel to shreds, along with its passengers. At the moment of contact, Kirk heard a wailing sound and he knew that neither he nor McCoy had uttered it. Then he knew nothing.



Spock's sudden collapse caught them off guard, and Sayant sprawled face down across the bed while Sarek landed seat first on the floor. Even as he regained his feet, Sayant's fingers flew to Spock's face. He looked up at Sarek. "He's in a deep, natural sleep!" He moved his fingers slightly. "His mind is normal - he's no longer dreaming." He slowly removed his hand. "I think he'll rest quietly now. Sarek, contact Starfleet again - see if they've found out anything. I'll stay with Spock."

Sarek ran into Amanda outside Spock's door. His cries had reached her and she was pacing restlessly in the hall. "Spock is sleeping quietly now, Amanda. You should try to get some rest."

"Sarek, these dreams, are they real? Are Jim and Leonard in danger?"

"I do not know. Starfleet has sent out a ship to intercept them. We will have to wait to see what they find. Come, you must rest." When he got his wife settled, he contacted Starfleet, but they had no further news. When he got back to Sayant, he found Spock sitting up in bed.

"You are up late, Father."

Sarek glanced out the window at the approaching dawn. "I think it would be more correct to say I am up early, Spock. The sky to the east is bright."

Spock nodded slightly at what he assumed was yet another reprimand from his father for inaccuracy. "I assume there is a reason why you are both here at this hour." His raised eyebrow included them both, but his eyes were on Sayant.

The tall Vulcan took a deep breath. "You were dreaming again, Spock. I think your dreams are connected - I'm trying to fit their pattern together. You talk a great deal during them, but often your words are jumbled."

"Of what am I dreaming?"

Sayant glanced at Sarek. There was danger here - he was not sure how Spock would react to the truth and the intensity of his dreams. Sarek nodded slightly. "Spock," said Sayant, "do you remember a few days ago...I asked you if you recalled anything about the dreams that you had been having?"

Spock nodded but remained silent.

"Your dreams are always the same. You are seeing Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy in some kind of danger. Your dreams have become increasingly desperate and violent. Can you remember anything at all about them?"

Spock sat silent for long minutes, then shook his head. "I remember nothing. Surely if they are in danger, I would sense it when I am awake. I have done so in the past with the captain..."

"That was before your head injury, Spock. It is possible your brain is blocking that link because it is too weak to cope with the added strain when you are awake. Or it could mean that the dreams are just that - dreams. Come, I will help you to the bath, then breakfast."

Sayant stayed close to Spock, but none of his periods of sleep that day produced any dreams. He lay peaceful and silent. Sayant finally went to his own room and fell into a deep yet troubled sleep.



The wreckage didn't catch fire; there wasn't enough left to burn. The ship had split on impact and broken into a thousand small pieces as it plowed through the barely yielding ground. When it finally came to rest, two figures lay broken and bleeding on the scarred surface.

After many hours, one figure stirred. The shreds of a gold shirt clung to the bloody body. With slow, painful movements, a hand reached out to touch the now cold body of the man lying so close to him.

"Bones..." The word was a low moan. The hand fell. The pain was lessening, and he felt himself start to float, feather-light, within the broken mass that was the once strong body. He heard the voice again, that tiny voice at the back of his mind. "Don't worry, Spock," he whispered, "don't worry about us. We'll be all right. Don't worry..."



Sayant was awakened by a terrified Amanda. He ran to Spock's room. Spock was lying on his side, tears running down his face.

"Jim, don't die. I can't live without you. Please, Jim, hold on. I need to be with you; don't go without me. Please, please wait!"

Sayant looked at Amanda. "How long has he been like this?"

"About five minutes. He was sleeping quietly when all of a sudden he stiffened. He lay rigid for a few minutes, then he started to cry. Sayant, what does it mean?"

But Sayant's attention was drawn to the figure on the bed. Spock had stopped crying, but his words continued. "Hold on, Jim. Wait, I'm coming..."



The large cruiser sent down a shuttle. Its stabilizers took a pounding, but they managed to land safely. Their readings showed one very weak life form. They ran.

James Kirk was alive, but only barely. He was terribly injured. The doctor examined him, then shook his head. "He's beyond any help I can give him."

As they stood there watching, Kirk slowly reached out his hand, a smile crossing his face. Then a tremor shuddered through his body and his hand dropped. The rescue party looked at each other.

"Did he say something?"

The doctor nodded. "It sounded like 'Spock'."



Sayant and Amanda were standing beside Spock. His tears had dried and a radiant smile crossed the ravaged face as his arms reached out for some unseen contact. "Jim!" His body went limp. Instantly Sayant's hands went to Spock's face. There was nothing there to meet them, only an empty shell. The spark of life had fled. Sayant slowly straightened up, his mind fighting to understand what he had just witnessed. There was no physical reason for Spock to die, yet something had caused him to stop holding onto life.

Amanda started to cry quietly. She had seen by Sayant's expression that Spock was dead. Sayant's arms went around her in a purely instinctive human gesture. "He felt no pain, Amanda. He is at peace."

"But why did he die, Sayant? What's been happening to him that would cause him to die?"

Sayant's answer was interrupted by Sarek's arrival. One glance at their faces told him what their words were unable to say. "When did he die?"

"Only moments ago."

Amanda gently freed herself from Sayant's arms and went to Sarek who was blindly staring at the body of his son. Her quiet crying was the only noise which broke the silence. They were all stunned by the unexpected suddenness of Spock's death.

Finally Sayant began to understand what had happened. He looked at Sarek. "You received word from Starfleet. They found the captain and the doctor dead."

Sarek's eyebrows rose. "They found them only minutes ago. How did you know?"

Sayant looked at Spock's peaceful face. "I didn't - he did. There's something I often heard in my childhood among humans, Sarek, but did not believe until now. I often heard it said that dreamers never lie..."



